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A GREAT TEMPTATION.



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A GREAT TEMPTATION.

BY

DORA RUSSELL,

AUTHOR OF

'FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW,' 'THE BROKEN SEAL,' 'THE TRACK
OF THE STORM,' 'A FATAL PAST,' 'THE VICAR'S
GOVERNESS,' 'THE LAST SIGNAL,' ETC.

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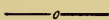
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A GREAT TEMPTATION.

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CHAPTER I.

STRUGGLES.

HALF an hour later Anna Lindsay heard Sir Ralph leave the house, and watched his tall figure as he walked across the Market Place. Then she went down to the drawing-room and found Laura still there.

‘Sir Ralph Woodland has just been here,’ said Laura, quietly enough, as Anna entered.

‘Indeed?’ replied Anna, trying to speak in her ordinary way.

‘He has come down to see about the alterations at Harewood; he is going to stay on a little while now for the shooting, he said.’

‘He’s a great sportsman, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, George said he is a splendid shot; he has gone down now to George at the office.’

That was all that was said. Anna sat drinking her tea, and wondering that the carpet did not open under Laura’s feet and swallow her up for her iniquities. Laura sat silent and absorbed. These two women never had much to say to each other, and they seemed to have less than usual this afternoon. Then, about half-past six

o'clock, George entered the room quite in a state of pleasurable excitement.

‘So Sir Ralph called to see you this afternoon, Laura?’ he said. ‘He told me he had been here, and I’ve had him at the office for ever so long, and now he’s gone on to Harewood. He’s going to build stables there, and make no end of alterations, and he means to stay over the winter for the hunting. But I daresay he told you all about it?’

‘He told me he was going to stay there for a little while just now,’ answered Laura.

‘Yes, and he’s had a lot of fine carved furniture sent down from town, and he’s asked us all to go and stay with him; he’s really a very civil fellow.’

Anna Lindsay did not speak; she

sat with her eyes fixed first on the husband and then on the wife. The storm was brewing, she was thinking bitterly, and she longed for the thunder-clap to burst.

‘I did not care for Harewood very much,’ said Laura, slowly. Do you, George?’

‘It’s a fine old place, I think, but it’s something to have a neighbour who can offer you such shooting as Sir Ralph can; certainly these rich fellows have it all their own way in this world.’

Laura did not speak. She went upstairs to dress for dinner, and she sighed uneasily as she did so. She wished now she had not gone to Danvers Park; wished she had not met Sir Ralph Woodland again. No good can come of it, only harm, she told herself. When

she had married George she had never expected to see him more. She believed he had changed to her, that he was weary of her, and now—when it was too late—she knew this was not so.

‘He should not have bought Harewood,’ she repeated to herself time after time. ‘I must see him sometimes, and it will unsettle me; only make me feel how weary everything is—oh, how weary, how weary!’

She had felt this ever since her return from Danvers Park. That brief visit seemed to have changed the world to her. The dull hours, the dull days at Red House, the narrow country gossip, and George—poor George!

‘He is so good, so kind, and yet—’ Laura knew she had never loved him, would never love him, but ‘the image of

one face' had not haunted her when she married George as it haunted her now.

'And I owe him so much,' she thought restlessly, and this made her very gentle in her manner to George during the rest of the day. And on the following morning she determined to try to occupy her mind. She made a great effort. She sat down determinedly to begin a new book, and forced her brain to dwell on the sorrows and temptations of others, while her own heart was racked meanwhile.

The conflict told on her appearance, and the next time she saw Sir Ralph he inquired if she had been ill.

'No, I have been working hard,' she replied quietly; working hard not to think of him; to keep to the narrow groove that she had chosen for herself.

For she realised what every woman of her sensitive, highly-strung nature will surely realise—that she had made a great and irreparable mistake in marrying a man she did not love. Poverty is bitter, struggles are hard, but not so bitter and hard as a daily effort to act an affection which does not live.

George, in his kindly way, soon grew uneasy about her health, and begged her not to go on writing so hard.

‘I must, I must!’ she answered, with almost passionate impatience.

‘But you have no need to do it, Laura. Surely you have everything you want?’

Everything! Her heart echoed this word with dreary emphasis. George meant she had a good roof over her head, a good husband to supply her

daily needs; and what else did she require? He did not understand the heart hunger that was thinning the cheeks of his young wife; he did not understand how all her life was wearisome to her with him.

Then came a formal invitation to the whole party at Red House to spend a few days at Harewood Hall. This invitation included old Mr Gifford and Miss Lindsay, and Mr Gifford was very much gratified by receiving it.

‘I think I should like to see the place again,’ he said. ‘I used to go every year in the old squire’s time, and it’s very kind of Sir Ralph Woodland to ask me.’

But to the surprise of everyone at Red House, Laura expressed a wish not to go.

‘I should rather not go, George. I

am busy with my new book, and am not feeling very well, so you go, and leave me quietly at home.'

'It is nonsense, Laura,' answered George. 'Sir Ralph would, I am sure, be very much disappointed if you did not go, and the change will do you good; and I'm only glad you'll be obliged to leave that stupid book behind.'

Laura smiled a languid smile.

'How do you know it is stupid?' she said.

'Oh, it mayn't be stupid in one sense, but what I mean is that it is stupid of you going on working as if you were working for your daily bread.'

'I have promised to have it finished by a certain time.'

'Oh, let the publisher wait; I am sure at one time he was not over civil to you.'

‘No,’ said Laura, and her heart went back to that time, and to the dreary struggle from which George had rescued her. ‘I am ungrateful,’ she told herself, and she went up and put her slim hand into George’s.

‘I owe so much to you,’ she said.

‘Well, then, be a good little woman, and do as I wish. I want you to go to Harewood, Laura, and shall be really very much disappointed if you don’t.’

So she was overruled; the invitation was accepted; and Sir Ralph rode over to Suffold to make arrangements about the family from Red House going to Harewood. There was, of course, a considerable amount of gossip in the country town, where everyone talked of each other’s affairs, concerning this visit of the Giffords to Sir Ralph Woodland’s

new property. Mrs Masterman said no one was good enough now for 'Mrs George' but the county families, she presumed, and that she had not gone to church for two Sundays running, though she did not explain how this fact was connected with the county families.

But Laura really accepted Sir Ralph's invitation with a troubled, sinking heart. Life had become so complex and difficult to her; her feelings and her duty being in continual conflict, and she dreaded a certain power of will which she knew Sir Ralph possessed over her mind. She dreaded this power, and yet could not resist it. It was at once sweet and bitter to her. She recognised its danger, yet made no determined effort to put it away.

So in the early days of November the Giffords and Miss Lindsay went to pay

their visit to Harewood Hall. Sir Ralph had invited Sir Richard and Lady Danvers to meet them, but Lady Danvers was laid up with a severe cold, and could not go, after having accepted the invitation. When Laura heard this she wished to defer their visit also, but neither Sir Ralph nor George Gifford would hear of this. Sir Ralph, indeed, was secretly pleased; it was Laura he wished to have under his roof, and not Lady Danvers.

He welcomed his guests on their arrival with great courtesy, and presently showed them the improvements he had made in the house and grounds. Harewood was, indeed, a different place to what it had been when they had last seen it. The gardens and grounds were trim, and the house furnished with artistic taste.

‘ I thought you would like this cabinet, Anna Lindsay overheard him say in a low tone to Laura, as he was pointing out one of his new purchases. But he apparently paid her no particular attention ; Laura was conscious that his eyes followed her if his feet did not. These two seemed to see each other with some inner sense. Between them was that strange subtle link which it is impossible rightly to describe in words. Though apart, their souls held secret commune, and Sir Ralph understood the very struggle that was going on in Laura’s heart.

‘ She loves me,’ he told himself, ‘ but she thinks herself bound to the man who married her in her poverty, and whom she married because he could give her daily bread. But can such a bond last ; last when it is opposed to the strong

natural emotion she feels to me? It cannot, it shall not, for I love her too dearly to renounce her now.'

Yet he felt some remorse when he thought of George Gifford. He did not like George Gifford's perfect trust in his young wife. He had been an honourable man all his life, and he knew that he was now acting dishonourably. But he self-argued why should two lives be spoiled; why should both he and Laura sacrifice their whole happiness for the sake of a man that neither of them cared for?

'If she had loved him I would have given it up; but she does not love him; her life with him is a misery to her, and it must end.'

This had become his settled purpose. Yet no one at Harewood ever suspected it for a moment but Anna Lindsay. And

even her shrewd red-brown eyes would have been deceived if she had not overheard what he said in the drawing-room at Red House.

As it was she watched and waited, but made no sign that she did so.

There were two other guests at Harewood, both sporting men, therefore Sir Ralph naturally took Laura in to dinner on the first day of her arrival, as she was the only married woman present. He felt her hand tremble on his arm as he led her downstairs, and he pressed it a little closer to his side. That was all. No word was spoken between them during dinner that George might not have heard—no word during the whole evening.

The next morning all the men, except old Mr Gifford, were early afield; Sir Ralph requesting Laura to act as hostess

during his absence, sending his coachman for her orders.

She and Mr Gifford and Anna Lindsay therefore took a drive in the morning, and after lunch, as the afternoon was fine, she went out for a walk in the grounds alone. She asked Anna Lindsay to go with her, but Anna declined. She would stay and keep her uncle company, she said, and Laura felt her absence a relief.

Beneath the tall and now nearly leafless elms at the foot of the garden, as the sun was sinking behind a bank of heavy clouds, Laura paced nearly half an hour thinking of many things, but mostly of the strange destiny which had placed her in the position in which she found herself. It did not surprise her, presently, to see Sir Ralph advancing

towards her. He had said he would return early, and, having heard from Anna Lindsay that she was in the grounds, he had gone out to seek her.

‘Are you weaving a new plot?’ he said, with a smile, as he met her.

‘No,’ answered Laura, with a smile also, though it was a faint and shadowy one.

‘How does a plot grow?’ continued Sir Ralph; ‘for I suppose it does not spring into life all at once.’

‘No; at least mine do not. They grow as our feelings grow, I think, from small beginnings.’

‘Until they grow too big for us, and we must tell them somehow. Is that it?’

‘Something like it.’

‘Do you believe in fate—in destiny?’

Laura shook her head.

‘I think I do. I think it is in vain to struggle against it.’

‘We do not make our own fate, certainly,’ said Laura, in a low tone.

‘No; we are driven into a hole, and must get out of it as best we can.’

‘There may be no way out.’

‘A strong will can force one.’

‘Not always. There are some things that cannot be undone.’

‘The way may be hard, and the path rough, but I believe there is still a way. Anything is better than a life of unending struggle and regret.’

Laura sighed wearily.

‘You know what I mean,’ went on Sir Ralph, with a passionate ring in his deep voice. ‘We have both made a

mistake—a terrible mistake—but we must get out of it as best we can.’

‘Why do you speak thus?’ answered Laura, and she looked at him half reproachfully, half sadly. ‘You know I will not, must not, listen. You only make my life harder—you who should help me; and I need help, I need help indeed!’

Tears rushed into her eyes as she spoke, and her lips quivered, and Sir Ralph felt a keen pang of self-reproach as he saw this.

‘Forgive me!’ he said; ‘but it is so difficult not to speak of what one feels so much.’

Laura made no answer. She turned away her head, and for a few moments Sir Ralph walked on in silence by her side. The sun sank beneath the bank

of clouds; the wind began to stir the brown branches of the elms; the air grew chill, and Laura slightly shivered.

‘It is growing cold,’ said Sir Ralph; ‘perhaps you had best go indoors.’

Before she could reply, they both saw George Gifford advancing towards them, who met them with a pleasant smile. He thought no more, indeed, of meeting Laura with Sir Ralph than if he had met her with Anna Lindsay.

‘I came out to meet you,’ he said, looking at Laura, ‘for Anna told me you were in the grounds somewhere; but I did not know you had Sir Ralph for an escort,’ he added, with a good-natured glance at his host.

‘Yes, I met Mrs Gifford a few minutes ago,’ said Sir Ralph. ‘I was telling her

I think it is getting rather cold for her to be out.'

'It is chilly,' said George, pulling the collar of his overcoat up. 'And you look rather pale, too, Laura. Take my arm, little woman, you had better go in.'

He took her hand as he spoke with familiar affection, and drew it through his arm, and Sir Ralph's dark face paled as he saw the simple action.

'I think I will leave you now,' he said a moment later. 'I want to go round by the stables.' And as he spoke he raised his cap and turned away, with an angry jealous pang burning in his heart.

CHAPTER II.

A SUDDEN BLOW.

It had been fixed that the Giffords were to stay three days at Harewood, but Sir Ralph urged them to remain longer. George, however, pleaded his business engagements.

‘A hard-working lawyer must think of his clients, Sir Ralph,’ he said, smiling. ‘I am bound to be back at the office by Friday.’

‘But go into Suffolk on Friday, and then return here,’ replied Sir Ralph, ‘and Mrs Gifford and Miss Lindsay, of course, will remain here—and your father.’

George looked at Laura inquiringly.

‘Oh, no, no, George,’ she said hastily ;
‘we must all go on Friday.’

‘I suppose that settles it,’ answered George. ‘When you are a married man, Sir Ralph, the first thing you’ll have to learn is obedience.!’ And George laughed.

But Sir Ralph visibly winced.

‘He gives you a bad character, you see,’ he said, looking at Laura, who blushed beneath his gaze.

Then George turned away and began talking to Anna Lindsay; and Sir Ralph said in a low and somewhat bitter tone to Laura,—

‘You seem in a great hurry to leave my house.’

‘It is better I should go,’ she answered, also speaking in a low voice.

‘I see no difference it can make.’

Laura did not speak, but she felt it did make a difference. Seeing Sir Ralph daily was too great a strain on her own powers of endurance, when George also was by her side. She had noticed the jealous look on Sir Ralph’s face the evening before, when George had taken her hand in his and drawn it through his arm. She had seen Sir Ralph’s lips wince and quiver when George approached her, and she was conscious that she preferred George not to be near her in Sir Ralph’s presence.

‘I am better away,’ she told herself, and so she meant to go. But her leaving with George angered Sir Ralph greatly.

‘Have I annoyed you in any way?’
he presently asked.

‘No, no, it is not that, but—’

‘But what?’ asked Sir Ralph, bending his head a little nearer.

‘I must go back to my work.’

‘You have no necessity for working now.’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘You mean it keeps you from thinking? You see I can read your thoughts—but in spite of work you will think, you must think.’

‘I must try not to do so.’

‘If you succeed will you give me a lesson in the art? Do you think,’ he went on bitterly, ‘I would not also forget it all if I could? Do you think it makes me any happier to remember the old days—to see you again, in

memory, looking in my face as you used to look then?’

‘Oh, hush! hush, Sir Ralph!’

‘You madden me by your indifference, or feigned indifference. You grudge me a smile, and yet I know, I feel—’

‘Sir Ralph, do you see Miss Lindsay looking at us? For my sake do not speak, do not look as you are doing now,’

‘I am a bad actor, I am afraid. Yes, I see Miss Lindsay’s red-brown eyes have a curious flicker in them. I dislike that woman, and yet I have no reason.’

‘She is not lovable, certainly.’

‘Few women are lovable, to my mind. What is it that makes the charm, I wonder? Is it that the mind attunes

itself to ours? It is something beyond mere beauty, though beauty has doubtless great power. But a man wants more than that to fill the complex nature of his heart.'

Laura sighed uneasily.

'Do you remember the first time I spoke to you in the picture gallery?'

'Yes.'

'And do you remember when we went, long after, to another picture gallery, and we sat and talked? Laura, I loved you then—as I love you now.'

He almost whispered the last words, but Laura heard them. At the other end of the room George and Anna Lindsay were still talking, and George noticed at this moment Sir Ralph's earnest expression and attitude.

'Sir Ralph is talking in a wonder-

fully impressive way to Laura,' he said ;

' I wonder what it's all about ?'

' Perhaps he's trying to persuade her to stay on,' suggested Anna.

' Very likely ; let us go and ask them ?'

So George went up to his wife, and said pleasantly to her,—

' I am sure Sir Ralph is trying to persuade you to do something, Laura ; what is it ?'

Laura's face crimsoned and then paled.

' I was trying to persuade her to stay over the meet on Tuesday,' said Sir Ralph.

' Well, won't you stay, Laura ?' asked George.

' No, I have some work to do, and I must do it,' answered Laura, and then

she turned away. To stay any longer at Harewood Hall she felt was impossible.

So the next day—Friday—the family party returned to Red House, and the old weary life began again for Laura. Her mind was out of tune; in that state when trifles cease to interest and amuse, and when there seems no pleasure under the sun. She sat down to her work in listless fashion; she wrote a few lines, and her thoughts wandered away. Again she heard that low, pleading voice,—

‘Laura, I loved you then—as I love you now.’

George came in cheerful and cheery; asked what she had ordered for dinner—a subject on which he had considerable interest. Laura had forgotten the dinner! Still, there was plenty of time,

as it was only yet early morning, but George did not look over well pleased.

‘You think of nothing but that confounded book, I believe,’ he said. ‘If you find housekeeping such a trouble you’d best let Anna order the dinners as she used to do before.’

‘Very well,’ answered Laura coldly, and she again lifted up her pen. But George did not mean nor wish to offend her, and after looking at her for a moment or two he laid his hand kindly on her shoulder.

‘I didn’t mean that, you know, little woman,’ he said, ‘but I am vexed to see you always poring over your writing-table, instead of bustling about the house, which would be far better for you. You don’t look over strong, and I wish you would take more exercise.’

If you like, I will come home early from the office to-day and take you for a walk.

‘Not to-day, thank you, George,’ answered Laura gently, ‘I don’t feel very well to-day.’

‘I am sorry for that, dear,’ and George bent down and kissed her forehead, or rather the curls on her forehead. ‘Well, good-bye now, and take care of yourself.’ And he turned and went away, and Laura sighed deeply after he was gone.

Then she roused herself and went to see after that important affair the dinner! And it is an important affair, no doubt, to a hard-working man like George Gifford. But, oh, the difference of a loving wife, ordering little luxuries for her husband, thinking of what he would like best, of his tastes, his fancies, and an unloving

wife considering the same duty. Laura wished many a time that she had let Anna Lindsay go on ordering the dinners and keeping the keys. The small responsibilities worried her ; they disturbed her ideas ; they broke into the thread of her plot.

Still it had to be done, and she did it. Then after lunch she tried writing again. But struggle against it as we will, something of the mood that we are in affects our writings. Laura felt weary and depressed, and she wrote without spirit. But about four o'clock the house door bell rang, and she heard a man's footstep crossing the hall.

It was Sir Ralph Woodland. She had been writing in the small inner drawing-room which she always used, and she rose from her writing-table to receive him.

‘I am interrupting you,’ he said gravely, as he held out his hand.

‘You are interrupting nothing worth reading,’ answered Laura, with a smile; ‘I can’t get on somehow with my work to-day.’

‘Something is disturbing your mind?’

‘I suppose so; at least I can’t write.’

‘I told you that you could not help thinking in spite of yourself.’

‘And I said I should try, and I mean to try—not to think.’

‘It is no use, Laura,’ and Sir Ralph went a step nearer, and laid his hand heavily on her writing-table; ‘neither of us can forget the past. Why you refused me then I cannot conceive, but I know that past was dear to you, as it was to me.’

‘We must both forget it,’ said Laura,

in a low tone, casting down her eyes.

‘We neither of us can. Why prolong a useless struggle? Laura, do you know why I came to-day?’

Laura slightly shook her head.

‘I came to ask you to link your fate with mine; to break loose from ties that must be, that are repugnant to every feeling of your heart.’

‘You know that I cannot do this.’

‘You must; you shall!’ cried Sir Ralph, with a sort of imperious impatience. ‘Do I not see that you are miserable? What is the use of going on living such a life as yours is now? Leave Mr Gifford, and as soon as it is possible we shall be married.’

‘It is quite impossible!’ said Laura, rising, and beginning to pace the room

in the greatest distress. 'Speak of this no more, Sir Ralph—you—you add to my misery.'

He followed her. He took her reluctant hand; he bent down and kissed it.

'Forgive me if I pain you,' he said, 'but I do it because I know the struggle in your heart. You think yourself bound to Mr Gifford; whom you do not love?'

'I am bound to him,' said Laura, with trembling lips.

'Not as you are bound to me! Love binds you to me with truer bonds than a few words from a parson's lips, which can have no meaning unless they be true. In your case they never were true. You took a false oath, and are leading a false life.'

'You are cruel! cruel!'

'I seem so, but I am not. If I believed

you were happy I would go away ; go out of your life, and see you no more. I would not think of myself, hard and bitter though the wrench would be. But I know you are not happy, that here you never can be happy ! With me—'

'Sir Ralph, hush, hush !' cried Laura, in quick alarm, and she grasped his arm with her trembling fingers. 'That is my husband opening the door with his key—he is coming here.'

Sir Ralph drew back with sudden calmness and stateliness, and when a few moments later George Gifford walked into the room he was standing with an air of perfect composure at a little distance from Laura's writing-table.

'Ah, Sir Ralph,' said George, advancing with extended hand, 'so you are here ? And how are you ?'

The two men shook hands, and exchanged a few words, and then Sir Ralph explained the seeming object of his visit.

‘I came to try and persuade Mrs Gifford again to come to the meet on Tuesday,’ he said. ‘It is to be not more than a quarter of a mile from the house at Harewood.’

‘Well, and are you going, Laura?’ asked George, looking at his wife, who was very pale.

‘No, George, I cannot go,’ she answered in a faltering voice.

It struck George that she was looking very ill, though he never for a moment suspected that Sir Ralph’s visit had anything to do with it.

‘I came home early,’ he went on, ‘to see if you had changed your mind, and would go out for a walk, but you do look

very seedy. But, Sir Ralph, you will stay and dine with us, won't you ?'

But Sir Ralph declined. He remained a few minutes longer, and then he took his leave and went straight to the hotel where he had put up his horse. He also was very pale, and he bit his lips under his moustache more than once as he rode slowly homewards, and when he arrived at Harewood he went to his own room and began pacing the floor with restless footsteps.

'I am a bad man, I suppose,' he was thinking, 'to urge her to do against her will what she, no doubt, believes to be a sin. But to my mind it is no sin ; it is a sin for a woman to marry a man she does not love ; but Laura loves me, and she shall never regret that love. I shall be good to her always—poor girl,

poor girl! What hard fate was it that parted us, when our love would have had no sting, no remorse, to her tender heart? But she will get over this—in her love she will forget it—I must teach her to forget it.'

He went to the window of the room as he spoke, and stood looking moodily at the fast-darkening sky. Many problems were passing through his mind; great questions to which he had no guide. Sir Ralph Woodland had drifted away from the teachings of his youth, and in his manhood held no creed that interfered with his own will. He loved Laura, and she loved him, and he told himself—or tried to tell himself—that this was a sufficient reason to defy all laws.

Laura, in the meantime, was trying to

seem at ease and talk as usual to George, while in her heart a conflict was going on almost too great for her to endure. Every day her life was becoming more strained, and its ordinary routine harder to bear. A long Sunday followed this momentous meeting with Sir Ralph, and then a long Monday and Tuesday. But on Wednesday a blow struck her which placed a sure weapon in the hand of her enemy, Anna Lindsay, which she was not slow to use.

The two were sitting together in the morning, after George had gone to his office, and the *Suffold Morning Post* was lying unopened on the table beside them. Laura was puzzling over some household accounts, which she could not quite make exact, when Anna took up the newspaper and began carelessly scanning

its columns. Suddenly she gave an exclamation.

‘Good gracious! What a terrible thing!’ she cried.

‘What is the matter!’ asked Laura, looking up from her account book.

‘A dreadful accident happened yesterday to Sir Ralph Woodland on the hunting field. He was thrown, and his horse rolled over him. They fear—’

But here Anna stopped, for with a sort of cry Laura sprang to her feet.

‘What!’ she gasped out, ‘what!’

‘They fear he is fatally injured,’ continued Anna, with her red-brown eyes fixed on the white, despairing face before her.

Laura asked nothing more. A deadly faintness crept over her; the room seemed to whirl around her, and with a faint

moan she fell senseless on the floor at Anna Lindsay's feet.

For a moment or two Anna thought the shock had killed her. She rang the bell hastily; she tried to raise Laura's head. Then a servant ran in.

'Oh, Miss Lindsay, what is the matter?' said this woman, in dismay, when she saw her mistress's prostrate form and white, rigid face.

'She has fainted; she is in a fit,' answered Anna. 'Get some water and rub her hands.'

The servant made haste to obey. Then the other servants came in, and Laura was lifted on a couch. But still she lay motionless, and finally Miss Lindsay sent for the doctor, and to the office for George. There was triumph in her heart as she did this. George

should know of the false wife he had cherished, she told herself, and she eagerly awaited his coming.

He came in great haste, before the doctor arrived, and Anna met him in the hall.

‘What is this? What is the matter with Laura?’ he asked breathlessly.

‘Come in here, George,’ answered Anna, and she pulled him by the hand into the dining-room, the door of which was standing open.

George turned quite pale as she did so, and Anna saw with jealous eyes this sign of emotion.

‘She is not—?’ he gasped out with trembling lips.

‘I read out the account of Sir Ralph Woodland’s accident yesterday on the hunting field,’ she hissed forth, ‘and

when she heard it she fainted at once dead away. I've sent for the doctor, and I sent for you.'

'What nonsense! Where is she?' said George quickly.

'She is in the breakfast-room. I thought I had better tell you the cause of her illness,' answered Anna, 'when no one else was near.'

CHAPTER III.

SIR RALPH'S VISITOR.

GEORGE GIFFORD made no answer to his cousin's insinuations. He broke hastily away from her and went into the breakfast-room, and, lying on a couch, with the servants standing around her, he found his wife.

Laura was deadly pale, but a faint twitching and contraction of her face showed some return to consciousness.

'She's coming round, sir,' said the cook, who was bathing Laura's hands with cold water, now addressing her master.

George made a step nearer, and stood looking at his wife with a strange feeling in his heart. But at this moment the doctor hurried into the room, and, shaking hands with George as he passed him, at once commenced to endeavour to revive Laura.

‘Perhaps I had better go into another room,’ said George slowly, and he left the room as he spoke, and in the hall he met Anna Lindsay.

‘How is she now?’ asked Anna, eagerly.

‘She looks very ill,’ answered George coldly, and then he went into the dining-room and shut the door behind him, and sat down to think.

‘Could there be any truth in this story of Anna’s?’ he was asking himself. He also had seen the account of Sir Ralph’s

accident in the newspapers at the office, and it was certainly extraordinary that it should have such an effect on Laura if Anna's words were true.

‘But she was always jealous of Laura,’ George also reflected, and then he began to look back on what had occurred during the last few weeks. Certainly Laura's spirits had not been good lately, and she had been looking ill. But he had never noticed anything in Sir Ralph's manner to her that was at all out of the common. He was a sensible man, but not a quick or observant one, and he was very matter-of-fact. To his mind, a man paying attention to a woman meant to be constantly at her side. This certainly Sir Ralph had not been.

‘It is just some folly of Anna's,’ he decided, but all the same he felt disturbed.

Anna's evil words had not fallen on unheeding ears.

Presently the doctor rapped at the door and entered the room, followed by Anna.

'I should like a word with you, Mr Gifford,' said Dr Wallace, who was a little, bright-faced, keen-eyed, middle-aged man. 'Has Mrs Gifford had any sudden shock lately likely to bring on this attack?'

'Not that I know of,' answered George, a little hoarsely.

Anna Lindsay said nothing. She was standing behind the doctor, and George did not care to look at her face.

'She is in an exceedingly low state of health,' continued Dr Wallace; 'and the action of her heart is weak, and any sudden news or anxiety would inevitably cause faintness, and she must be guarded against

all excitement. I will send her some medicine in a quarter of an hour, and will look in again during the evening. She must go to bed at once, and, above everything, be kept perfectly quiet.

‘Very well, doctor,’ said George Gifford slowly. And then the little doctor bustled away, and after he was gone for a moment the cousins looked in each other’s eyes. In Anna’s were written, ‘I told you so,’ as plainly as if she had spoken the words ; in George’s uneasiness and doubt. But neither spoke on the subject nearest their hearts. George left the room and went into the breakfast-room, where Laura was now sitting in an easy-chair, supported by cushions. She was still extremely pale, and one of the maids was holding a bottle of salts near her face. She seemed to see George as he entered, and there was a

strange, piteous look in her eyes, like one in extreme bodily or mental pain.

‘Are you better, Laura?’ said George ; but his voice was changed from its usual frank affectionateness.

She opened her palid lips to answer him, but no word came forth.

‘The doctor says you must go to bed at once,’ continued George, ‘so cook and I will help you upstairs—come, Laura.’

He raised her up by her arm as he spoke, and drew it through his own, and the cook supported her on the other side. All strength seemed suddenly to have gone from Laura’s limbs. She tottered, she trembled even with the aid of George’s stalwart arm, and they had some difficulty in getting her upstairs. There George left her with the women ; he went back to his office, he sat down

to his desk, but still he was thinking of Anna Lindsay's words.

And Laura lay still with a great burning pain in her heart, and an overwhelming sense of wretchedness and misery. Ralph Woodland dying—dying, and she could not touch his hand! Anna Lindsay, with evil intent, had added the words, 'they fear fatally,' so Laura was as one without hope. She stared at the pattern of the paper on the walls; she heard the clock tick even with her dulled ears; the voices of those around her sounded as in a dream. 'Was his soul passing now?' she was thinking. 'Would he come, would he come one moment before he went?'

The doctor sent her a composing draught, which mercifully clouded her brain, and so the miserable hours passed

on at length in semi-unconsciousness. But he was uneasy about her condition, and when he came in the evening, again impressed on George the extreme necessity of quietness.

‘If there is anything preying on her mind the cause should, if possible, be removed,’ he said.

And what could George answer? He knew of nothing preying on her mind, except what Anna Lindsay had insinuated. But Laura did not rally, and he became extremely uneasy. At night she became so low that the doctor considered it his duty to sit up with her for some hours, and advised that a nurse should be sent for.

‘I have to go to Harewood early in the morning, or I should not leave even now, Mrs Gifford,’ he said, as he rose to

go. 'But you will have heard of Sir Ralph Woodland's accident?'

He was bending over her as he said this, with her hand in his, and something in the start, in the sudden vibration of her form gave a key to his acute mind as to the cause of Laura's illness.

'He is going on very well,' he added; 'he got a bad tumble, and a broken arm, but he'll pull through all right.'

Laura gave a gasp, and then a strange hysterical laugh broke from her quivering lips. The relief was so sharp, so sudden, that her brain seem to reel under the shock. The doctor went on speaking soothingly to give her time to recover herself.

'He's a splendid constitution,' he said, 'hard as iron, and makes a capital patient. I was sent for as ^{early} soon as the accident

occurred on Tuesday morning, but Sir Ralph was as cool as if nothing had happened.'

'Will—will—he live?' came faltering from Laura's pale lips, while her dark eyes were fixed beseechingly on the doctor's face. They were the first words Laura had spoken since she had fainted, and the doctor thought that he now understood the case.

'Live?' he answered. 'To be sure he'll live. He's a fine plucky fellow, and will soon be on his feet again.'

He had heard the gossip we may be sure about the Giffords' visit to Harewood, and about Sir Ralph's calls at Red House. He had scarcely listened to it, but now he was interested.

'So this poor young woman has fallen in love, I suppose,' he was thinking as he

stood a few moments longer by Laura's bedside. A change had come over her appearance ; her dulled eyes had brightened, a flush had risen to her white cheeks.

‘ Could you give me something to make me sleep ? ’ presently said Laura, in a low voice, ‘ my head feels so strange. ’

The doctor gave her another dose of the composing draught, and then left her for the night. George came out of the dining-room as he was crossing the hall to leave the house.

‘ How does she seem now ? ’ he asked anxiously.

‘ I think she is a little better, but she is feverish and low. No one must speak to her to-night, Mr Gifford. I have given her a composing draught, and I hope she will sleep. ’

‘ Very well, ’ said George, and then the

doctor shook hands with him and went away.

‘Poor fellow,’ he thought, as he wended his way to his own home, where an affectionate, bright-faced little wife was anxiously waiting his arrival.

But Laura did not sleep for many hours. An ineffable sense of joy and relief flooded her whole being. She tossed from side to side, strange fancies came whirling into her brain, and an intense restlessness took possession of her. Not until the grey winter dawn did she sink into a heavy slumber, and when she awoke she was still weary, and her limbs racked with pain.

During the next few days she had a sharp attack of nervous fever, and the doctor noted the eager anxious look in her dark eyes whenever he entered the room.

‘My patient at Harewood is going on very well,’ he would say in answer to the unspoken question, and once he ventured to speak of her to Sir Ralph Woodland.

‘That pretty wife of Mr George Gifford’s is ill,’ he said.

‘Ill?’ repeated Sir Ralph sharply.

‘Yes, she fainted last Wednesday morning, and I was sent for, and has been very low and feverish ever since,’ answered the doctor.

After this Sir Ralph used to ask each day how Mrs Gifford was going on. His own injuries, though severe, were doing well, but he was impatient and eager to be up again. But about a week after his accident he was startled one afternoon by his servant coming into his bedroom and telling him that a lady wished to see him.

The blood rushed to Sir Ralph's dark and somewhat haggard face at this announcement, and a wild hope swept through his breast.

'A lady?' he repeated. 'What is she like?'

'I cannot say, Sir Ralph,' answered his servant. 'She's got one of those thick black veils on, and I could not see her face.'

'Show her up,' said Sir Ralph.

He never doubted it was Laura. He had thought of her so constantly since his accident, so longed to see her that he believed that she had come to him, and his heart beat and throbbed, and his strong hands trembled. A moment or two later a rap came to his room door, and his servant entered.

'The lady, sir,' he said, and then there

followed him into the room, a tall, slender woman's form, dressed in a long black cloak, while her face was thickly veiled.

But in an instant, with the intuition of love, Sir Ralph saw it was not Laura. Something in the walk, though his visitor was graceful, lacked a certain dignity which was one of Laura's characteristics. The servant discreetly left the room, closing the door behind him, but also discreetly lingered in the corridor outside. Then the lady sprang forward and rushed to Sir Ralph's bedside.

'Oh, Sir Ralph,' she cried, 'this is terrible! What I have suffered since I heard of your dreadful accident!'

Sir Ralph started violently in bed. It was the voice of Patty May that sounded in his ears.

'And why have you treated me so?'

continued Patty, removing her veil with some caution, and showing her wealth of golden hair. 'What have I done that you should return my letter? That—that you should seem to wish our friendship to end?'

'Why are you here? This is no place for you!' answered Sir Ralph sternly, and he pulled the hand away from her which Patty had caught, and deliberately buried it in the bedclothes.

'Why,' said Patty, with a little sob, 'because I could not bear to think of you suffering alone, Sir Ralph. Ralph, what have I done that you should turn away from me?'

Upon this Patty fell down on her knees by the bedside, and if ever a man felt himself in a predicament, Sir Ralph certainly did at this moment.

‘This is absurd,’ he said, trying to move himself further from the side of the bed by which Patty knelt. But his broken arm in splints, and his bruises and bandages made this most difficult, almost impossible. There he lay at Patty’s mercy, as it were, and he felt furious at the situation in which he found himself.

‘What have I done?’ repeated Patty in a voice broken by sobs. She was really crying, for she had truly liked Sir Ralph, but her tears did not add to his amiability.

‘You had better go at once, Miss May; you are only making us both ridiculous,’ he remarked angrily.

‘Ridiculous,’ repeated the weeping Patty, ‘when you are so ill, and I am so unhappy? Why are you so hard and cruel? Only tell me what I have done?’

Sir Ralph was silent for a moment, and then he said with great bitterness,—

‘By the untruths you told me, you parted me from the woman I loved; the woman I wished to make my wife.’

‘If you mean that horrid Miss Ingram,’ said Patty, with an instantaneous change in her voice and manner, and lifting her head, ‘I told you nothing but the truth. A young man did come to see her, and she did go about with him.’

‘Yes, her family lawyer — whom she married.’

‘I heard she was married,’ answered Patty, in a relieved tone. ‘Well, there was no harm done then? I suppose she was engaged to him then?’

‘No harm done,’ repeated Sir Ralph savagely. ‘Yes, there was harm done; worse than harm.’

He forgot all about the absurdity of the situation, forgot a pretty girl was kneeling by his bedside, and that he could not get away. He only remembered that Patty had parted him from Laura ; that she had brought infinite pain, sorrow and remorse to both their lives.

‘It was worse than murder,’ he went on passionately, his dark face flushing, and his eyes glowing. ‘You murdered the reputation of an innocent girl. You wrote both the anonymous letters that you pretended to be so shocked at. You know you did, and you lied when you told me Miss Ingram had left her rooms with a young man. The whole thing was a hideous falsehood and invention, and now, when you know the truth, I wish—I request you to go away.’

Patty rose to her feet pale with passion.

‘You are a brute to speak to a woman so,’ she said. ‘I wish you were dead. I could strike you dead!’

‘You had much better go away,’ answered Sir Ralph coolly. Then he rang a hand bell which lay near him, and his servant appeared at the door of the room the next moment. ‘Jameson, show this lady out,’ he said.

Then Patty turned on him like a fury.

‘If ever I can do you any harm,’ she said, vindictively raising her hand as if she would strike him, ‘I will! I will live to make you pay for the insults you have heaped on my head this day!’

‘You have done me all the harm you can do,’ answered Sir Ralph. ‘Good-morning.’

And without another word Patty went away.

CHAPTER IV.

A GREAT TEMPTATION.

AFTER Patty May had quitted Sir Ralph's room with hasty and irregular footsteps, a sudden change of mood came over her, and she burst into loud and hysterical sobs.

‘Oh! miss, be quiet, for goodness’ sake,’ said Jameson, who was Sir Ralph’s valet, in a half-frightened whisper; ‘all the people in the house will hear you, and the doctor’s orders are that Sir Ralph has to be kept quite quiet.’

‘I don’t care!’ sobbed Patty. ‘He’s treated me shamefully—most shamefully!’

Patty screamed this out at the top of her voice ; she was going down the front staircase at the time ; her yellow hair dishevelled, her eyes swollen and stained with tears. Altogether a most distressful looking woman, when, to Jameson's consternation, he saw the butler in the very act of opening the front door of the house, and perceived that Mr George Gifford from Suffold was standing outside.

‘ Oh ! miss, please be quiet ! ’ he prayed hopelessly.

But Patty took no notice of his entreaties. She strode recklessly on, scarcely glancing at the butler or the gentleman on the entrance steps, who were both naturally astonished at such an apparition in the house of a sick man. But Patty passed them without a word, followed by the trembling Jameson, who beckoned to

the driver of a cab, who was seated on his box a few yards off. The man drove up at once, and Jameson hastily opened the carriage door and handed the weeping Patty in.

‘Where shall I say to, miss?’ inquired Jameson.

‘The railway station at Uphill,’ answered Patty in a choked voice, naming the station nearest Harewood.

The cab-driver nodded, and drove away, and Jameson turned round and slowly ascended the steps leading to the house on which George Gifford and the butler were still standing.

‘The lady seems in great distress, Jameson?’ said George Gifford, speaking to the valet, who grinned uncomfortably at his master’s visitor.

George Gifford smiled, and so did the

butler, but none of the three men pursued the subject.

‘Then Sir Ralph is really going on all right?’ said George Gifford, addressing the butler, who, remembering the handsome gratuity George had slipped into his hand on leaving Harewood, was naturally inclined to be very civil.

‘Yes, Mr Gifford, as well as he possibly could,’ answered the butler. ‘It was an uncommon bad accident, sir, but Sir Ralph is pulling himself together again, and the doctor hopes he will be up in no time. But won’t you walk in, Mr Gifford? Perhaps Sir Ralph would see you.’

‘No, not to-day, thank you,’ said George, and again he smiled. ‘Just tell him that I called to inquire how he is going on, and that I am extremely pleased to hear such good accounts.’

Then another little friendly transaction took place, and half-a-crown was transferred from George's pocket to the butler's, and George walked away with a somewhat grim smile on his face, thinking of Sir Ralph's visitor.

It was only human nature to tell the little episode at home. When George reached Red House he went upstairs to inquire how Laura was feeling, and when he entered the nurse left the room.

The fever had passed away, but she was very low and weak, and the expression of her face was very sad, and her dark eyes full of mournfulness. She smiled gently as George approached the couch on which she was lying, and held out a very thin, white hand, for she had not seen him before during the day.

‘Good afternoon, George,’ she said.

‘Well, how are you feeling to-day, Laura? Come, you look a little better, and I hope we will soon have you downstairs,’ answered George, taking her hand.

Again Laura smiled that gentle, shadowy smile.

‘Thank you, George,’ she said.

‘I’ve been to Harewood to inquire after Sir Ralph,’ continued George, ‘and he’s going on all right, too. But a very funny thing happened, Laura, when I was there.’

‘What was that?’ asked Laura, with her eyes fixed on her husband’s face.

‘Well, just as I arrived there, a good-looking, weeping damsel, evidently in great distress, was going away. Jameson the valet was escorting her, and there had apparently been a scene upstairs. I fear our friend must be a gay young man!’

And George laughed.

Laura said nothing for a moment ; then she asked quietly,—

‘What was she like?’

‘Oh! tall, with golden hair, and would have been pretty, I suppose, if her eyes had not been red with crying. And she looked a little vixen, too, I thought. I expect Sir Ralph will have his hands full.’

‘I think it must have been a girl called Patty May,’ said Laura, still quietly. ‘Sir Ralph told me about her ; she is very anxious to marry him.’

‘To marry him!’ repeated George incredulously.

‘Yes, she is his old tutor’s niece, if it is the girl I mean.’

George gave a little whistle ; it was a queer story, he thought, and he thought also that it was an odd thing that Sir

Ralph Woodland should confide his love affairs to Laura.

But he did not say this. And presently he went downstairs and into the library, as it was not yet time for dinner, and there Anna Lindsay joined him. She had done her best since Laura's illness to make everything comfortable for George, and George secretly thought that she was a more experienced housekeeper than poor Laura, and that the dinners had been decidedly better than usual during the last few days.

'How do you think Laura is looking to-day?' said Anna, who knew of George's visit to his wife's room.

'Much better,' answered George; 'if it were not such abominable weather I think she should go to the sea for a week or two, and that would quite set her up.'

‘You think she wants a change?’ said Anna slowly.

‘I think everyone is the better for a change after an illness. By-the-bye, I walked over to Harewood this afternoon to inquire after Sir Ralph.’

This was the first time that George had mentioned Sir Ralph’s name to his cousin since the day when she had told him that Laura had fainted when she heard of his accident.

‘Well?’ asked Anna, looking quickly up in George’s face.

‘Oh, he’s going on all right, it seems. He had a fair lady to visit him to-day, seemingly.’

‘A fair lady?’

‘Yes,’ and then George told the story over again, that he had told to Laura upstairs.

‘How disgraceful!’ cried Anna indignantly.

George shrugged his shoulders.

‘Young men will be young men, you know,’ he said; ‘and I suppose Sir Ralph is like the rest.’

‘Did you tell Laura?’ inquired Anna eagerly.

‘Yes,’ answered George, and then he dropped the subject.

His cousin’s words about the beginning of Laura’s illness had greatly disturbed him, though he always told himself without reason, and therefore he never encouraged Anna Lindsay to talk about Laura. He wished to lead a quiet life, and knew that Anna, not unnaturally, was jealous of Laura.

‘Her fainting was just the commencement of the fever, of course, and I

hope now she will soon be well,' he repeated to himself, and to everyone who inquired after Laura. Nevertheless days went on, and weeks, and still Laura did not get well. It was as if some blight had fallen on her, sapping away the life from her young life, and wasting her beauty like a fading flower.

The winter wore on apace. Gloomy November merged into a bleak, stormy December, and still Laura languished, though the doctor declared all symptoms of fever were gone. She used to sit in the drawing-room in the afternoons, and made some attempts to continue her writing, but it was more to rid herself of Anna Lindsay's company than for any work she could really do.

'I cannot write if anyone is in the room,' she once said irritably, and Anna

Lindsay took the hint. She also continued to act as housekeeper, and Laura was too listless to interfere with her.

Then one day, about the middle of December, George came into the drawing-room where Laura was sitting alone, and told her that he had again been over to Harewood to see Sir Ralph Woodland on business.

‘And how is he?’ asked Laura.

The room was only lighted by the fire-light, and George could not distinctly see the face of his young wife, who was sitting in the shadow, as she made this inquiry.

‘Oh, he says he’s nearly well again, but he looks ill, haggard and ill,’ answered George. ‘He’s been out, and, by-the-bye, he said he was going to drive into Suffolk to-morrow, and that he would call on you.’

The fingers of Laura’s thin, white hand,

which was lying on her dress, contracted as George spoke, and a slight shudder passed through her frame.

‘I asked him to stay to dinner,’ continued George, ‘but he declined. He’s talking of going up to town.’

George was pleased that he had asked Sir Ralph to dinner, and not allowed ‘any folly of Anna’s’ to prevent his doing so. He wished to keep on good terms with his new client, and felt sure that as Sir Ralph had declined to remain to dinner, and as he was going up to town so soon, that all Anna’s insinuations were absolutely without foundation.

‘I wonder he has not gone before,’ said Laura slowly, as if she had been thinking; ‘it must have been so dreary for him being ill so long, all alone at Harewood.’

‘ Unless he had the yellow-haired young lady to console him,’ laughed George.

But Laura did not laugh, nor smile. She sat very still a little while after George left the room, and then began to wander up and down the floor restlessly, with her brow contracted as though in deep thought. She had never gone down to dinner since her illness, nor did she do so this evening. She retired to her own room early, and old Mr Gifford, George, and Anna Lindsay had their rubber with a dummy as in the days before George’s marriage.

The next morning George went to the office early, and Laura did not see him before he left Red House. And all day Laura was in a state of great but suppressed excitement. She looked so ill that Anna Lindsay thought she was going

to be laid up again, and this idea was by no means unpleasant to Anna's mind.

She made a pretence of dining in the middle of the day at lunch time, and Anna noticed she ate absolutely nothing.

'You eat less and less every day, I think, Mrs George,' she remarked.

'I certainly do not feel very hungry to-day,' answered Laura, with a wan smile. 'I think I shall try to write this afternoon,' she added, for she wished to rid herself of Anna Lindsay's company.

'Then in that case I'll go and have tea with Mrs Masterman,' said Anna; 'she invited me yesterday when I met her; she expects her mother.'

This was a welcome announcement to Laura.

Thus, if Sir Ralph came, she would be able to see him alone, she thought. And

this actually happened. At half-past three Anna put on her best bonnet and went away, and just about four o'clock Laura heard a carriage stop at the door of Red House.

Her heart beat tumultuously, and her whole form trembled. Her weak health made the agitation of her mind painfully evident—so much so, that when a few moments later Sir Ralph was announced, and walked into the dimly-lighted drawing-room, he was absolutely shocked at Laura's appearance.

He took her hand, he looked into her face, but the common-place words he had meant to say died unspoken on his lips.

'You are ill?' he said at length, in a broken voice.

'Yes,' she answered, almost in a whisper.

‘I heard you had been ill, but—I did not expect to see you thus.’

‘I am nervous; anything upsets me now,’ said Laura, trying to take her hand from his, but Sir Ralph held it fast.

‘How you tremble! Does it make you more nervous seeing me?’

‘Yes—but I wished to see you,’ answered Laura, with a great effort.

‘And I have wished to see you; I have thought of this meeting hour after hour during the long, dreary weeks since my accident.’

Laura gave a fluttering sigh, and Sir Ralph led her to a seat on a couch near, and stood before her watching her face by the flickering firelight.

‘What you have gone through!’ he said, suddenly and passionately. ‘Your life of late has, I believe, been terrible to you?’

‘I have suffered very, very much,’ answered Laura, in a broken voice.

‘I can see it, I can see it! Laura, do you know I came here to-day with a deliberate purpose—to ask you to end the struggle which is destroying you?’

‘Yes, it must end,’ said Laura faintly.

‘You shall never regret it,’ continued Sir Ralph, and he sat down by her, and caught her hand in his. ‘My life shall be devoted to you, and as soon as it is possible we shall be married.’

‘No, no; that cannot be,’ half whispered Laura, drawing back.

‘It must, it shall be! My dear, dear one, you love me, do you not?’

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, with faltering lips; ‘I will not deny it. The

news of your accident — that wicked woman Anna Lindsay said your fatal accident—nearly killed me.’

‘Did this cause your illness?’ asked Sir Ralph eagerly, bending nearer to her. ‘I feared as much. I judged of your feelings by my own.’

‘Yes; Miss Lindsay read out of the papers that you had been thrown from your horse—and—and she added you were fatally injured. Oh, I shall never forget that dreadful day,’ continued Laura, rising excitedly. ‘When — when I recovered consciousness, I lay in misery—lay thinking you were dying—until the doctor told me.’

Sir Ralph rose also, and went and leaned against the mantelpiece, and Laura saw by the firelight that his face was very pale and haggard.

‘Are you really better now?’ she said more gently.

He put out his hand and drew her to him.

‘When will you come to me, Laura?’ he said. ‘When will you end all this?’

She did not speak. She stood there looking up at him. There was a great struggle in her heart.

‘There would be no happiness for us,’ she said presently, in a low, faltering voice.

‘Oh, yes, yes, there would! Besides, is there any happiness for us now?’

‘No, no, indeed,’ moaned Laura.

‘Laura, what I told you before is absolutely true. Had you cared for Mr Gifford; did I not know that you do care for me, I would never have urged

this upon you; I would never have spoken to you of my love. The fault is not ours. That wretched girl parted us, and we have found this out when it is still not too late to snatch some sort of happiness, at least.'

'It could never be the same,' said Laura, in a broken voice.

'I know that,' answered Sir Ralph, half impatiently, half fondly. 'No; never the same, Laura, as if you had married me long ago, when I asked you first. But, whatever it may be, it must be better than the living death you are suffering now.'

For a moment or two Laura made no answer. She stood there by his side, her hand in his, and the flickering firelight showed her face to Sir Ralph's eager eyes.

‘Of what are you thinking?’ he asked quickly.

‘Give me a little time to think,’ answered Laura slowly; ‘give me a few days.’

‘A few days will seem an age to me.’

‘I will write to you,’ went on Laura; ‘there is something I wish you to know—the reason why, when you asked me to be your wife—I said it could not be.’

‘No reason will affect me now, Laura.’

‘Still, I wish you to know. I have thought this all over during my illness. I have prayed for strength—’

‘For strength for what?’

‘To—tell you everything.’

Her head drooped lower, and a

moment later Sir Ralph saw a tear roll down her cheek.

‘Do you not completely trust me?’ he asked tenderly.

‘Yes, I trust you—completely trust you—but go now, Sir Ralph—I—I am not very strong.’

‘I know that very well, and I do not want to tire you. But when shall I come again?’

‘Not until you get my letter—after that—’

‘I shall come; do not be afraid, nothing that you can write to me will change my feelings towards you—but if you wish me to go now—good-bye. How soon will you write?’

‘In a day or two—give me till then—good-bye.’

She almost whispered the last word,

and Sir Ralph remembered long afterwards the yearning look of tenderness in her dark eyes as she raised them to his. He bent down; he kissed both her hands, and as the door closed behind him Laura fell on her knees and buried her face in her hands.

‘Oh! God, give me strength—give me strength!’ she prayed aloud. ‘Mine is all gone—give me strength to resist his will!’

It was piteous to see her kneeling there struggling against the great temptation in her heart.

‘Why was I born?’ she asked, rocking herself to and fro in her misery. ‘But I must see him no more—I dare not see him now.’

CHAPTER V.

LAURA'S LETTER.

Two hours later, when George came in for dinner, he found Laura sitting in the drawing-room, looking very pale, but composed. She mentioned Sir Ralph's visit, and said she thought he still looked very ill.

‘Did he stay long?’ asked George.

‘No, only a short time; but talking has tired me, so I will say good-night, George.’

‘You had far better sit up for dinner; I met Anna coming in, and she said you ate nothing for lunch.’

‘No, I am too tired; good-night, George,’ and she held out her hand to him, but George bent down and kissed her face.

‘Well, good-night then,’ he said, and so they parted.

But Laura did not retire to rest when she reached her own room. She locked the door first, and then went up to the brass-bound escritoire, in which was hidden away the letter her dead father had left her. She drew this out and read it through once more, and a deep sigh died on her quivering lips. But this time she did not return it to the escritoire. She laid it on her ordinary writing-desk, and sat down and wrote a long letter, over which she shed many bitter tears. Then she addressed an envelope, and in this envelope she placed

her own letter, and then that of her dead father's. She sealed this letter, and having put it in her desk, she commenced to write another letter which seemed to cost her even more pain and trouble than the first.

‘Poor fellow, poor fellow!’ she murmured, as she wrote on. She paused for words; she sighed; she seemed half to repent her purpose.

‘But, no, no, I can bear it no longer,’ she said half aloud. ‘Anything is better than such a life—a life of misery, deceit and lies.’

So her second letter was written at last, and this also was placed in her desk, and then she lay down to rest, but not to sleep. All through the long winter's night, the long, dreary hours, she lay awake struggling still with her own heart. On

one side lay a dimmed happiness, on the other well nigh despair.

The grey morn found her pale and exhausted, and she sank into a restless slumber until the servant brought up her breakfast and letters about half-past eight o'clock. On one of these she seized eagerly and tore it open. Danvers Park was printed on the envelope, and it was from Lady Danvers. It was as follows:—

‘MY DEAR MRS GIFFORD,—I shall be delighted if you will come to me for a few days. I have heard with deep regret of your illness, and I am sure the change here will do you good. I also have been far from well, as I have never quite thrown off the effects of the bad cold which prevented my meeting

you at Harewood in November. Therefore, we must help to nurse each other! Will you come to-morrow? And if you will telegraph to me when you get this, a carriage will be waiting to meet you if you will settle what train you mean to travel by. My husband sends his kindest regards to you, and will be so pleased to see you, and I need not say that I shall. Please tell Mr Gifford, with my compliments, that any day he can join you we shall be delighted.—Always most sincerely yours,

‘LUCINDA DANVERS.’

Laura read this letter over, and then gave a sort of gasping sigh. Presently she rose, put on a dressing-gown, and rang the bell. When the maid an-

swered it she sent her down with a message to George.

‘Tell Mr Gifford,’ she said, ‘that I wish to see him before he goes to the office this morning.’

George came upstairs a few minutes later, and after a word or two, Laura placed Lady Danvers’ letter in his hand.

‘I should like to go, George,’ she said.

George read the letter and looked very well pleased.

‘Of course go, my dear,’ he answered; ‘the little change will be the very thing for you.’

‘I think it will do me good,’ answered Laura, slowly and painfully.

Something in the tone of her voice struck George, for he looked at her quickly.

‘You look very far from well this morning,’ he said. ‘When do you think of going, Laura?’

‘To-day if you will send a telegram for me?’

‘Certainly, my dear, if you think you are really well enough to go to-day.’

‘Yes, yes, I am well enough,’ said Laura, and a strange wistfulness came over the expression of her face as she stood there looking at George.

‘What train will you go by, then?’ he asked.

‘The two train will suit best, I think.’

‘I will write out a telegram to Lady Danvers, then, to say you will go by that train, and I’ll order a carriage to take you to the station, but I am afraid I can’t meet you there to see you off, as I have an appointment with a man

at two o'clock. So mind you wrap up warmly, Laura, and let me hear from you as soon as you arrive at the Park.'

Laura made no answer; she was still looking at George, and her face was very pale.

'And you'll want some money, I suppose, little woman?' continued George, good-naturedly.

'No, George, I have enough,' she answered, and her lips quivered as she spoke.

'Well, I must be off; the carriage had better be here at a quarter to two. Are you sure there is nothing you want?'

'No, George, nothing.'

'Good-bye then, dear, and take care of yourself. Tell Lady Danvers I'll come over on Sunday to see you; good-bye again, Laura.'

He stooped down and kissed her white face as he spoke and warmly clasped her hand. And Laura's hand lingered in his also. Again she looked in his face.

‘Good-bye, George,’ she said, in a very low and faltering voice; ‘and—thank you for all your kindness to me.’

‘What nonsense, little woman—be sure you write.’

He smiled, nodded, and went away, and thus the husband and wife parted, and Laura stood still after he was gone, and there was great sadness on her face.

‘Poor George! poor George!’ she murmured.

After a while she roused herself. She had much to do, and the rest of the morning she spent arranging her affairs as though she were going on a long journey.

She went down to luncheon, and found

old Mr Gifford and Anna Lindsay, who knew she was going to start for Danvers Park at two o'clock.

‘The change will do you good, I hope, my dear,’ said Mr Gifford kindly, for she was a great favourite of his.

Anna Lindsay said nothing, but she thought the more. She thought it was absurd, if ‘Mrs George’ were well enough to go visiting, that she could not dine with the family at home.

‘She’s going to meet Sir Ralph, I suppose,’ she reflected; ‘well, we’ll see.’

In due time the carriage that George had ordered came to the door, and Laura’s luggage was carried down to it. Then Laura went up to her father-in-law and kissed his wrinkled cheek.

‘Good-bye, Mr Gifford,’ she said gently,

and the old man warmly returned her greeting.

‘You must come back looking quite well and strong,’ he said; ‘and please give my best respects and remembrances to Lady Danvers.’

‘Yes,’ answered Laura; and as she spoke she looked wistfully round the room, and then, after shaking hands with Anna Lindsay, she quitted Red House.

George came back only in time for dinner, and inquired all about Laura’s departure, and then the evening passed in the usual quiet fashion.

‘There will be a letter from Laura in the morning,’ George said as they sat playing their rubber; ‘she promised to write as soon as she arrived at the Park.’

But when the morning came there was

no letter from Laura, and George felt surprised, and rather annoyed.

‘She has missed the post, I suppose,’ he said, going on with his breakfast the while; ‘her letter will come probably in the middle of the day.’

But when the mid-day post was due, for which Anna Lindsay watched, there was still no letter from Danvers Park. George felt so sure that there would be that he sent a young clerk up to Red House to bring it down to him at the office, and Anna Lindsay had the pleasure of writing a few lines to her cousin to tell him that no letter had arrived. Upon which George telegraphed to his wife at Danvers Park, asking her to write at once, and he might have received a letter in answer to this by the last post, but none came.

The next morning, however, brought a letter from Laura, which George eagerly tore open, and then as he read it his face suddenly paled.

‘What does this mean?’ he said, in an agitated voice.

‘What is the matter!’ asked Anna Lindsay hastily, who was watching his face.

‘This is the most extraordinary thing, the most unheard of thing!’ went on George, in increasing agitation; ‘this is from Laura—but she’s not at the Park—has never been at the Park! She says she has left her home—she must have gone out of her senses!’

‘No,’ answered Anna Lindsay, rising, her face flushed with vindictive triumph; ‘it means she has run away with Sir

Ralph Woodland. I have long foreseen this.'

'You have long foreseen this?' repeated George, blankly, staring at his cousin.

'Yes, I was not blind,' continued Anna; 'I told you, George, only you would not listen to me, how she fainted when she heard of his accident; she has never been the same woman since, and, besides, I once overheard him say something to her—'

'What did you overhear him say?' asked George sternly.

'I heard him say, in this very house, that he could not keep away from her; that, even when he thought her most unworthy, he could not forget her; that he had bought Harewood to be near her. George, as sure as you are stand-

ing there, these two have gone off together, and they were lovers, I am certain, before you ever married her!’

Anna poured all this out with extraordinary bitterness, her red-brown eyes glittering with excitement, and George listened with absolute amazement.

‘You heard this,’ he said passionately, ‘and never told me? It is folly, I don’t believe a word of it! Laura never saw Sir Ralph until she went to Danvers Park—never, it is impossible!’

‘They were lovers before she ever went to Danvers Park,’ answered Anna doggedly. ‘No, I never told you, George, because you would not have believed me; you would have said I was jealous, but for all that I am speaking the truth, and you’ll find she is with him now.’

‘She says here,’ said George, again

looking at Laura's letter, which he still held open in his hand, 'that she is with no one; that she is alone, and means to remain so. She must be mad; she nearly starved before—'

'She'll not starve now,' interrupted Anna; 'she's with her fine gentleman; she considered no one in Red House good enough for her.'

'Be silent; how dare you say such things?' cried George. 'She has left me because she was unhappy about something—because—because, perhaps, I did not suit her.' And George's voice faltered and broke as he said the last words.

'What does she say in her letter?' asked Anna.

George made no reply; he looked again at the letter, but when Anna drew nearer to him, as though for the purpose

of reading it, he folded it and put it into his pocket.

‘Why, here is a letter from Danvers Park,’ now said Anna, lifting a letter that had come by the same post as Laura’s, but which until now had lain unnoticed on the table. ‘This is from Lady Danvers herself.’

George eagerly stretched out his hand and opened the letter which his cousin held, and as he read its contents his face grew more agitated and unhappy still.

‘DEAR MR GIFFORD,’ Lady Danvers had written, — ‘A telegram arrived here for Mrs Gifford this afternoon; but as I had previously received a telegram from her to tell me that she had been prevented coming here, I think it best to enclose the telegram for her to you, as it may prevent some possible anxiety. Trusting nothing

serious disappointed us of her proposed visit,—I remain, very sincerely yours,

‘LUCINDA DANVERS.’

‘Good heavens! this looks as if it were all planned!’ cried George. ‘Her visit to Lady Danvers has been a blind.’

He flung Lady Danvers’ letter on the table as he spoke, and Anna Lindsay, unbidden, took it up and read it through.

‘Of course her visit to Lady Danvers was a blind,’ she said. ‘She sent a telegram somewhere by Jane, the housemaid, the day Sir Ralph Woodland called, after he was gone, and Lady Danvers’ invitation arrived the next morning. Do you see, George? They had arranged to fly together when he was here, and the pretended visit to Lady Danvers was to get away more easily.’

Something like a groan broke from George's lips, and then without another word he left the room, carrying Laura's letter and Lady Danvers' away with him. He wanted to be alone to think, to re-read Laura's letter, to consider whether to believe her words.

As he passed out of the room he met his father in the hall, who was going down to breakfast unusually late.

'Well, George—' said the old lawyer cheerfully; but something in the expression of his son's face attracted his attention. 'Is there anything the matter?' he asked.

'Ask Anna,' replied George hoarsely, and so passed on, going to his own room, and when he entered it he locked the door behind him and once more opened Laura's letter.

‘GEORGE, I must still write dear George, for I never can forget your unceasing kindness to me,’ he read in Laura’s well-known handwriting, though the words had evidently been written with trembling fingers ; ‘I am going to leave you. When you receive this I will have left Red House, never to return. I cannot indeed lead the false life that I have led of late any longer. When I married you I meant to be a good and faithful wife to you, and a faithful one I shall still be. But after I went to live in London, there crossed my path one whom against my own will I learnt to regard with a deep and enduring affection. He asked me to be his wife, but there were circumstances connected with my former life ; connected with my poor father, that to my mind rendered such a marriage impossible. I told him it could not be, but I

wished to remain his friend. But we were parted. I was maligned to him by a woman who wished to marry him, and he believed I was unworthy of his regard. He went abroad, and evil times came to me, of which you know ; but one day, after months, I met the only man I really cared for in the Park. He passed me with a cold bow, and all brightness in life seemed to end for me at that moment. George, when I saw you again I believed that the romance of my life was done. You were good and kind ; I had always liked you, and after a little while I promised to be your wife ; promised this, meaning to keep my vows in word and deed.

‘ Now I cannot. I am leaving you, but not with my old love, but because I still love him. I cannot eat your bread, and live under your roof, knowing that my

heart is false to you. The strain is too terrible, and so I am going out into the world—a lonely woman once more—to earn my living. I shall change my name, and shall never trouble you, and do not seek to find me. Let me be as one dead to you, and so shall I be as one dead to him for whose sake I am leaving you. I am bidding him farewell to-day as I am bidding you. Evil tongues may not believe this, but it is nevertheless true. I grieve greatly for the pain I am giving you ; I thank you with all my heart for your goodness to me, but it is better that I should go. The diamonds and jewels that you gave me I have left in my dressing-table drawers, and the keys are in my little desk. The money I have I will take with me, as I know you would not wish me to starve.—May God always bless you. LAURA.'

CHAPTER VI.

A TERRIBLE CONFESSION.

WHILE George Gifford was reading his wife's farewell letter with mingled emotions of anger and distress, at Harewood Hall Sir Ralph Woodland was also reading a letter from Laura, which filled his heart with extreme agitation and pain.

His servant had just brought in the letters, and Sir Ralph had at once eagerly glanced over them. He was expecting a letter ; anxiously awaiting a letter, and in a moment he selected one, the address

being in a handwriting he knew, and hastily tore it open.

An enclosure fell from it as he did so, but it fell almost unheeded. He was reading Laura's words; his eyes were riveted on the lines which at once struck a chill, cold pang into his heart.

‘I promised to write,’ he read, ‘and I now fulfil that promise with a sad and troubled heart. You said my life must have been terrible of late; how terrible you cannot tell! If my husband had given me any cause for complaint; if he had not been everything that was kind, and just, and good, I could have borne it better. But my daily life with him has become too great a struggle for me any longer to endure. I am leaving him for your sake, but not with you.’

To live under his roof, and be ever thinking of you, is to my mind more false than to go away. But I will injure him no further than this. I asked you not to see me again until I wrote, and I did this because an inner consciousness told me that your will is stronger than mine. I can find strength to write to bid you farewell, but I might not have found strength to speak the words.

‘Yet it must be. We must see each other no more, though I know my heart will never change to you. You will not, I think, quite forget me, but you must not let my memory blight your life. When you have read the miserable letter I enclose—my dead father’s letter—you will understand why, when you asked me to be your wife, I told you it was impossible. I loved you then, as I love you

now, but the terrible shadow of his crime lay between us ; lies between us still.

‘I have written to my husband and told him the truth ; told him how I loved you ; how I believed you had utterly changed to me, and how when we met again I found this was not so. But I have told him also that in future I shall be as one dead to you.

‘Do not grieve about my future. It will be sad and lonely, but many lives are sad and lonely, and I must bear it as best I can. At all events, it will be better than a life of hypocrisy or sin. This was all the choice my love for you left me—except to go away. L. G.’

Sir Ralph read and re-read every word of this sad letter, with an intense sense of disappointment and self-condemnation.

‘But it is madness; I must find her,’ he muttered, starting to his feet. ‘She has left her home; she has sacrificed her life, and yet she wants to hide herself from me—but she shall not, she shall not!’

He walked hastily once or twice across the room; his dark brows were knitted, his strong hands clenched. He was thinking what he would do, when suddenly his eyes chanced to fall on the enclosed letter or paper, which had fallen from Laura’s letter, when he tore it open.

He went quickly up to the table, and raised this folded paper. It was written in a man’s handwriting, written closely, and it was long. He stood by the table reading it, and as he read a look of great horror came over his face.

‘Good heavens!’ he muttered. ‘Oh! my poor, poor girl!’

It was the letter that Major Ingram had left to his daughter to be read after his death; the letter that George Gifford had told her lay sealed among his papers, and it contained the confession of a hidden crime.

‘LAURA,’ it began, ‘you have sometimes asked me about your mother, but I could not speak of her. But after I am gone you shall know the dreadful truth. This hand is red with her blood, though, God knows, unwittingly. I was deeply attached to her, but she was a beautiful woman, and I was jealous of her, unreasonably, I now believe, until, while we were in India, a man named Woodland exchanged into my regiment.

‘From the first I hated this Woodland, who was dark and haughty-looking, and was, I believe, the heir to a baronetcy. He paid your mother great attention, and I was much annoyed by this, and remonstrated with her about it. She promised not to speak to him any more, but I received a hint that in my absence she sometimes went to his bungalow, which was situated some quarter of a mile distant to the one we then occupied. I determined to discover the truth concerning this, and, having received orders to visit a distant outpost, I started from the cantonment, after parting with your mother. But when some miles away I turned my horse’s head and rode back by a circuitous route, to Woodland’s bungalow.

‘It was evening when I reached it,

and I saw not a single servant about the place. So, after tying my horse to a tree, I went quietly on the low verandah that ran round the whole bungalow. From the spot where I stood I could see distinctly into one of the rooms beyond. And what do you think I did see? I saw your mother seated on a couch with this wretch Woodland beside her. He was holding her hand, and he was speaking in a low, pleading tone to her, with his head bent close to hers.

‘The sight seemed to drive me mad; the blood rushed to my head, and with a muttered curse I stood still and strove to hear what he said. He was urging her to leave her husband and child and go to England with him, and the weak woman was listening to his words.

‘I could bear it no longer; I sprang

from the verandah into the room with my revolver in my hand. Your mother saw me first; she gave a scream and rose. Then Woodland rose also, and as he did so I pointed the revolver at him and fired. As I did this your mother ran forward and flung herself on his breast as if to protect him. The ball struck her in the back of the neck, and a moment later I fired again at Woodland, and this time fatally wounded him.

‘He tottered and fell, and then I saw your mother was wounded. I tried to staunch the blood, but it was in vain. I scarcely looked at my enemy, who was struggling in his death throes. I lifted your mother on a couch—the very couch where she had sat a moment or two before with the dying wretch on the floor. But everything I did was useless; in a few

minutes—hours they seemed to me—she breathed her last, with such a look of horror on her face that it has haunted my whole existence.

‘What was I to do? Woodland by this time was unconscious, and there suddenly flashed across my brain the memory of a deep well, said to be haunted, which was situated in a little thicket just outside the bungalow. I raised her in my arms; I carried her out in the gathering gloom. Not a creature was to be seen. The man who had really killed her, who had wrecked her peace, had, I believe, sent every servant from the place. I bore her in my arms to the well, which was overgrown with ferns.

‘Laura, that well is your mother’s grave. I heard the hideous splash, and

then turned and fled from the accursed place like one distraught. I got my horse and rode all through that awful night in a state of mind too terrible to describe. I was not suspected; I reached the distant outpost I had said I was bound for, and the next day was recalled to hear that my wife had disappeared, and that Captain Woodland had been murdered. His body had been found in the bungalow, but there was none to tell the tale. He had only met his just reward, for but for this scoundrel Woodland, your mother might have been living still, and my soul unstained by a hidden crime.

‘But from that hour I have known no peace. Sometimes I fancy her restless spirit still lingers beside me, and I hear strange revengeful whisperings in my

ears. But if in another world we meet again—and I am weary of this one—she will know I did not mean to injure her, and that I have tried to do what I could during my embittered and remorseful existence for her only child.

‘Laura, forgive your dead father after you have read this, and remember that this accursed Woodland alone was to blame for the dark tragedy which ended your mother’s life. F. INGRAM.’

Sir Ralph Woodland read this long confession of his father’s murderer with a knitted brow, and a fast beating heart. He remembered the news being broken to his mother that her husband was dead; remembered her grief for the man who had been another woman’s lover, and who was lying in her unhallowed grave.

It was a gloomy story, dark and tragic, and its shadow had now fallen on his own life.

And Laura? He understood now only too well the cause of her timid rejection of his love when he had first asked her to be his wife. He took up her letter again; he pressed his lips on the sad written words.

‘I loved you then, as I love you now, but the terrible shadow of his crime lay between us; lies between us still.’

Sir Ralph was just a man to appreciate this feeling. Whatever sin his father had intended to commit, Major Ingram had murdered him. Sir Ralph began pacing the room again, still holding Laura’s letter in his hand. She was the daughter of his father’s murderer—this dear woman, to whom his heart was bound. It was

a terrible thought, and yet — and yet—

At all events, he must find her. If she had left her home through his influence; through her love for him; it at least behoved him to see that she had a home. Something must be done, and done at once; and for a few minutes Sir Ralph was undecided how to act. At last he determined to go to Red House, to learn the truth; to face the man whom he would have wronged.

Having made up his mind he at once carried this out. He ordered his horse; he rode quickly into Suffolk, and as he entered the Market Place, Anna Lindsay, who was standing looking out of the breakfast-room window, waiting for George to reappear, saw him, and hastily left the room to seek for her cousin.

At this moment the house-door bell at Red House rang, and Anna waited on the staircase to hear it answered. This was done almost immediately, but Anna, peering over the banisters, saw Sir Ralph standing dismounted at the door. She then ran on hastily to George's room and rapped.

‘Who is there?’ asked George sharply from within.

‘Let me in, George,’ answered Anna ‘I have something to say to you.’

Upon this George unlocked the door, and Anna entered the room in a state of great excitement.

‘Who do you think is at the door, George?’ she gasped out.

‘Who?’ asked George briefly.

‘Sir Ralph Woodland,’ answered Anna breathlessly. ‘George, he has come as a

blind, too. He has come to pretend she is not with him; to deceive you; I am certain of it.'

'She says she is not with him,' said George, in a low tone; 'it may be true.'

'Not it; they have planned it all between them. She may not be with him now, but he will join her. He knows very well where she is.'

At this moment the housemaid rapped at the room door, and George opened it.

'Oh, please, sir, Sir Ralph Woodland has called, and has sent me up to know if you can see him for a few minutes?' said the housemaid. 'I've shown him into the dining-room.'

'Very well, I will see him,' answered George gloomily; and then he turned round and looked at Anna.

'Don't you be taken in, George,' she

said, in reply to his mute inquiry. 'He's here as a blind, just as she said she was going to Lady Danvers' as a blind. It's a plot between them.'

George did not speak; he stood a moment or two thinking, and then he folded up Laura's letter and put it into his pocket, and having done this, proceeded slowly downstairs, and entered the dining-room through the open door, which he shut behind him.

Sir Ralph was standing by the window as he went in, and a deep flush rose to his very brow when he saw George. The two men bowed, both coldly and haughtily, and then Sir Ralph spoke.

'Excuse my intrusion, Mr Gifford,' he said, 'but I have received a letter this morning—'

'From my wife?' asked George Gifford,

with suppressed anger in his tone, as Sir Ralph paused.

‘Yes,’ continued Sir Ralph; ‘and she tells me she has left her home—that she does not mean to return.’

‘And you, I presume, are the cause?’ said George, with kindling eyes.

Sir Ralph did not speak. He stood there facing George, and there was self-reproach in his heart.

‘Yes,’ went on George angrily; ‘I, too, have had a letter from my wife, to tell me that the reason she has left her home is that she has met an old lover of hers again — a lover from whom she was parted before our marriage. Are you this lover, Sir Ralph Woodland?’

‘Yes,’ he answered, and he fixed his dark eyes on George’s face steadily as he spoke. ‘I am that lover, Mr Gifford. I

met your wife long before her marriage ; I asked her to be my wife, and she refused me.'

'May I ask why?'

'There were painful reasons—unknown to me then.'

'Yet you met as strangers?' said George indignantly. 'You pretended that you were introduced for the first time at Lady Danvers?'

'Mrs Gifford did not seem to wish to notice me when we met there.'

'No! And all this while I suppose you have been making love to her behind my back? I must say, Sir Ralph, I consider your conduct is inexcusable.'

'I have no excuse to offer you, Mr Gifford. I urged her to go with me, but she declined. On my word of honour—and this is why I am here to-day—I do not know where she is now.'

‘And how am I to believe this, after the way in which you have both deceived me? Most probably she is only waiting for you to join her,’ said George, very angrily.

‘I only wish it were so. I will not hide the truth from you; I did everything I could to induce her to leave her home with me, and her answer came this morning. It was a letter of farewell; a letter to tell me that she would see me no more, though for my sake—’

‘I understand,’ said George bitterly; ‘for your sake she would leave her husband, lose her good name! So she told me; you ought to be content, sir, with the mischief you have done, with the misery you have brought about!’

‘I feel my wrong-doing as deeply as you do, Mr Gifford. I have no excuse except this—I have cared for her; I do

care for her as I shall care for no other woman, and for this reason I have come to you. She has gone away alone—gone into poverty! She must be found; she cannot be left, perhaps to starve!’

‘Perhaps not,’ retorted George scornfully, for he was remembering Anna Lindsay’s words. ‘Perhaps you know better where to find her than I do, Sir Ralph Woodland, and probably you will not let her starve!’

‘I swear I do not know where to find her!’ cried Sir Ralph passionately, and his dark face flushed. ‘Would that I did; but I will try to find her; I will leave no stone unturned! Believe me or not, as you will, I am now speaking the truth.’

And without another word he turned and went away, leaving George in a miserable state of uncertainty and doubt.

CHAPTER VII.

A TEMPTING BRIBE.

THE same day Sir Ralph Woodland went up to town, and the day after George Gifford did so also. They both went to seek the same woman; and they both, naturally, went to the publisher of her first novel.

This gentleman, Mr Brook, received them civilly, but declared to each that he was quite unacquainted with Mrs Gifford's present address.

'She has been writing another book,' said George; 'did she send it to you?'

‘No,’ replied the publisher, smiling; ‘but I shall be very happy to receive it when she does.’

‘Her first book did well, I suppose?’ asked George.

‘Fairly well,’ answered the publisher, still smiling, and rubbing his hands together. ‘But we forwarded Mrs Gifford an exact account of the sales, etc., about three weeks ago. Mrs Gifford’s share of the profits amounted to a fairly respectable sum.’

George made no answer to this. He stood thinking. Laura had never mentioned having received this money from the publisher; this looked as though her flight had been for some time premeditated, he was reflecting.

However, he got no information from Mr Brook; nor did Sir Ralph.

George then went to a private inquiry office, and finally to the police. He offered one hundred pounds for the discovery of his wife, and he also had Sir Ralph Woodland's movements watched. He stayed in town more than a week, and was then recalled to Suffolk by the illness of his father. It had been a great shock to old Mr Gifford to learn that his daughter-in-law had left her home, and during George's absence Anna Lindsay had done her best to poison her uncle's ears regarding Laura.

'She is with Sir Ralph Woodland, uncle,' she repeated. 'George is wasting his time seeking her. The whole thing was planned before she left here.'

This also was the general opinion in the little town, and through her mother the report reached Lady Danvers, who was genuinely grieved to hear it. She

had noticed Sir Ralph was attentive to Laura whilst she was at the Park, and his having bought Harewood Sir Richard Danvers thought strange.

‘What did he want with it when he has such a fine place of his own?’ asked the jovial baronet of his wife. ‘Lu, I’m afraid your handsome authoress has not turned out well.’

As for the Vicar’s family, they heard of, and talked of, Mrs George Gifford’s disappearance with the utmost interest, and even excitement. Mrs Masterman’s opinion was that Laura’s head had been upset by her visit to Danvers Park, and that she had run away with Sir Ralph Woodland, because she hoped finally to induce him to marry her, and thus rise in life.

‘But he never will,’ affirmed the senior

curate's wife, with satisfaction. 'George Gifford, I suppose, will get a divorce, and then Sir Ralph Woodland will throw her over, and serve her right.'

But George Gifford did not seek to get a divorce, in fact, he had no grounds to go on. His wife had left him because she did not love him, but he had no proof whatever that she was with anyone else. Sir Ralph Woodland was living alone at an hotel in town, he easily ascertained, but the private inquiry men whom he employed to watch him could discover nothing more. In fact, it seemed as though both Laura and Sir Ralph had spoken the truth, George began to think, and that Laura had kept where she was living a secret alike from Sir Ralph and himself.

Of course Anna Lindsay tried to combat this idea. For one thing she did

not believe it, and that any woman should leave her husband and a comfortable home for the sake of a romantic feeling to another man was a matter utterly incomprehensible to Anna Lindsay's mind.

But though George said very little about it, he was yet deeply indignant at Laura's conduct, and this feeling was certainly not unnatural. Himself a good-looking man, he could not understand why Laura had not loved him. He had always been kind to her, he told himself, and she owed him so much, and to expose him to remark and annoyance was, at least, exceedingly ungrateful on her part.

In this unsettled state of affairs three months passed away at Red House, and nothing more had been heard of Laura. People had almost ceased to talk of her at Suffolk, and the Gifford family went on

very much the same as before George's marriage. But George kept himself in communication with the police, and also a strict surveillance was maintained by his orders on Sir Ralph Woodland's movements.

In the meantime Sir Ralph had never ceased in his efforts to trace Laura. After going to Mr Brook, the publisher of her first novel, and learning nothing there, he had called on Mr Valentine Ross, the editor of the society magazine where her first story had appeared, for which in reality Sir Ralph himself had paid. Mr Ross received him pleasantly, though he instantly thought of the transaction with Miss Laura Ingram, and the story which he had never yet paid for. But he was not disconcerted.

‘Ah, Sir Ralph,’ he said, rising, as Sir

Ralph was ushered into the room, 'exceedingly glad to see you. I hope you have brought me another story from that handsome young woman in whom you were so interested? By-the-bye, where is she now?'

Sir Ralph fixed his keen dark eyes on the pink smiling face before him, as Mr Ross said this, but Mr Ross's blue eyes never flickered.

'That is a question I was about to ask you,' answered Sir Ralph.

'Me?'

'Yes! Has she during the last few weeks offered you any of her work?'

'Certainly she has not, for if she had, I should have taken it. That story we published of hers was above the average, yes, decidedly above the average.'

‘And you have had no further communication with her?’

‘Not for months and months. By-the bye, she called here one day and thanked me for paying her so promptly.’

And Mr Ross laughed and showed his white teeth.

‘She told me about that. What made you tell her?’ said Sir Ralph grimly.

‘My dear fellow, I did not tell her,’ replied Mr Ross, with another laugh, ‘I only advised her always to be paid through Sir Ralph Woodland; and very good advice too! She told me you had given her five pounds; what she really should have had was three pounds ten. Will you have it now?’

‘There is no hurry about it,’ answered Sir Ralph yet more grimly; and then he rose and began walking slowly up and down

the editor's office. 'And you have never heard from her since?' he presently asked.

'Yes; she sent me one other story, but I was full up at that time; and, besides, her first story had not then been published, so I declined the second one; but if you have brought it now—'

'I wish I had! An extraordinary thing has happened, Ross. The young lady you knew as Miss Ingram married—'

'Married?' said Mr Ross, raising his light eyebrows.

'Yes, and she has now left her husband; and she is keeping where she lives a secret from her friends. This is why I came to you. I came to inquire if she had brought any work to you, for she must intend, I believe, to live by her pen.'

'Ah—' said Mr Ross, and a thoughtful expression passed over his fair face.

‘I thought it not unlikely that she would come to you—and she may. Ross, if she does, will you do me a favour? Will you give me her address?’

Mr Ross looked yet more thoughtful.

‘What if she binds me to secrecy?’ he asked.

‘Even if she binds you to secrecy,’ urged Sir Ralph. ‘Look, Ross, I will give anything to find out her address. You may name your own price.’

‘You think every man has his price then?’ smiled Mr Ross.

‘It is a matter of life and death to me to know where she is,’ continued Sir Ralph vehemently. ‘She has left her home—partly through me. I feel myself to blame; so if she comes here, Ross—’

‘Well, Sir Ralph, we are old friends.

‘If you can find out where she is living

I will give you a thousand pounds, and no one need be the wiser,' continued Sir Ralph, and Mr Ross's pink face grew a little pinker, that was all.

'A thousand pounds?' he repeated thoughtfully.

'Yes, a thousand pounds; please try to earn it, Ross, and my gratitude as well.'

'Well, your gratitude is a tempting bribe; so if this fair lady comes here?'

'Let me know at once. Do not alarm her. If she asks you to keep her name and address a secret stretch a point with your conscience for once. Tell no one but me; but tell me without delay.'

'All right, I'm your man. But what if she does not come near?'

'It's a chance, of course; but she may come.'

‘So she may. Woodland, my dear fellow, just by chance I am a trifle hard up this morning; do you think you could lend me a hundred pounds?’

‘Certainly,’ replied Sir Ralph, with a hard smile. ‘I have not my cheque book with me, but I will send a hundred on this afternoon; or would you rather have two hundred?’

‘I should rather have two hundred,’ smiled Mr Valentine Ross.

‘All right. Telegraph at once if—this lady calls. And now, good-morning, Ross.’

Mr Ross got his two hundred pounds, but weeks passed away, and he had no chance of earning the thousand pounds and Sir Ralph Woodland’s gratitude. Sir Ralph called at the office more than once, but Mr Ross had no news. Laura

had disappeared, seemingly, amid the vast multitudes of the great city, or hidden herself away somewhere else, for no one could find her.

Sir Ralph had begun almost to give up hope. He grew gloomy, and bitterly self-reproachful, when one evening, three months after Laura's disappearance from Red House, a telegram was handed in to him from Mr Valentine Ross, which was as follows :—

‘The fair lady was at the office this afternoon. Know her present address. Will call in an hour. Ross.’

Sir Ralph's excitement when he received this telegram was unbounded. His dark faced flushed, his strong arms trembled, and he kept walking restlessly up

and down the room until Mr Ross was announced.

The smart little man entered smilingly, and put one of his well-gloved hands into the trembling one offered for his acceptance.

‘Well, Woodland,’ he said, well pleased, ‘I’ve found her!’

‘Where?’ asked Sir Ralph.

‘My dear fellow, give me time to breathe! After all the amazing amount of false swearing I’ve gone through I really deserve some consideration.’

‘Do not talk such folly!’ said Sir Ralph impatiently. ‘Where is she? what did she say?’

Mr Ross sank down on the nearest chair, and affected to be half overcome.

‘Where is she?’ he repeated. ‘Well, at this moment I should say probably

crossing the bridge in a 'bus on her way to the ancient, but not very charming suburb of Putney.'

'Of Putney?' asked Sir Ralph eagerly.

'So she informed me. Well, let me tell you the whole story. I was busy, but one of the clerks came in to inform me that a lady wished to see me. I asked her name; message came back, should rather not give her name, but had written for me before. My thoughts flew to you. I said, "Show the lady in." The lady was shown in, and, lo and behold, it was Miss Ingram and no other.'

'Yes; go on.'

'I'm going on, my dear fellow, as fast as I can. I rose, bowed, held out my hand, which the lady did not seem to see. Then she said, "I once wrote a story for you, Mr Ross."

“I perfectly remember,” I replied. “You were introduced by Sir Ralph Woodland?” Upon this she sighed deeply. And I continued, “I hope you have brought me another story?”

“On one condition,” she answered; “which is, that you tell no one my name or address.”

“No one?” I said, with an agreeable smile.

“No one,” she repeated. “I have been married since I saw you; I have left my husband, and changed my name; and I wish no one to know where I am.”

“Your wishes are law to me,” I replied, mendaciously.

‘Then she produced her story, and talked a little, though in a reserved fashion. I asked her address, and after a moment’s hesitation she gave it. It is at

Putney, just after you have crossed the bridge, over a little linen-draper's shop. She said, "I am poor now," or something to that effect. Then, after a little more hesitation, and with a sudden blush, she asked after you.

"Have you seen Sir Ralph Woodland lately?" she said.

"Not for an age," I answered, and I hope I may be forgiven. Then I wrote down her address, and here it is, after which she rose and departed; but before she left she again said,—

"I can depend on you, may I not, to tell no one my address?"

"You may certainly depend on me," I said, and I reflected it was cruel to deceive so charming a woman; but then I also reflected it was, no doubt, for her good! And Mr Valentine Ross laughed.

But Sir Ralph did not laugh. He wrote down the address, and then he looked at Mr Ross.

‘You shall have the cheque to-morrow,’ he said, ‘if I find her to-night.’

‘To-night! Why, you are certainly not going to Putney to-night?’ exclaimed Mr Ross, aghast, who had intended to dine with Sir Ralph.

‘I certainly am. I am going at once. Thank you, Ross, you have earned my gratitude.’

‘And the—’

‘The cheque? It will be all right if your information is correct. Excuse me, Ross, but I am going now.’

‘Stop, stop, my dear fellow!’ cried Mr Ross, rising excitedly. ‘Why, you have not even asked the name that the fair lady goes by at Putney!’

‘I am off my head, I think,’ answered Sir Ralph grimly. ‘Well, what is it?’

‘Miss Boyd. Here it is written down.’

‘Thanks. Good evening, Ross.’ And in another moment Sir Ralph was gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

LAST WORDS.

IT was dark when Sir Ralph reached Putney, and the lamps were lit in the narrow streets. He had been directed by Mr Ross that the house where Laura lodged was close to the bridge, and he easily found it. The street was steep and crowded, but the small linen-draper's shop for which he was seeking was not full, and as he entered it a depressed-looking shopman hurried forward with the object of serving him.

‘Does Miss Boyd lodge here?’ inquired Sir Ralph, and the shopkeeper's face fell

when he found Sir Ralph was not a customer.

‘Yes, sir,’ he answered, ‘Miss Boyd has our drawing-room. She is a writing lady.’

‘That is the lady I want to see,’ said Sir Ralph, upon which the shopkeeper called to his wife in the back parlour that a gentleman had called for Miss Boyd, and then a faded, respectable-looking woman appeared.

She ushered Sir Ralph up the narrow staircase, which was not lighted, and rapped at a room door.

‘Come in,’ replied a voice, the tone of which Sir Ralph remembered so well.

‘A gentleman for you, Miss Boyd,’ said the landlady, opening the door, and then Sir Ralph saw the quiet interior.

A woman in a black gown sitting at a table, which was littered with papers, and

lit by a shaded lamp. A woman who turned round her graceful head as the landlady spoke, and did not for a moment recognise her visitor, for Sir Ralph was standing in the shadow of the dark staircase. Then he slowly walked forward into the room, and the landlady closed the door behind him, and Laura saw who it was.

She turned pale ; she started up. She did not speak.

‘ Laura,’ said Sir Ralph, holding out his hand, but she did not take it.

‘ Why have you come ? How did you find me ? ’ she asked in a broken voice a moment later.

‘ I came because I could not stay away,’ answered Sir Ralph. ‘ For the last three months I have sought you everywhere, Laura. You knew I would seek you.’

‘ You should not ; you should not,’ she

murmured, and she put one of her hands over her white face.

‘And is this all that you have to say to me?’

Sir Ralph asked this standing there facing the trembling woman before him, and he saw how deeply she was agitated, and that she looked ill and worn.

‘It is only giving fresh pain,’ she said, in a low and faltering voice.

‘No; the pain was in parting, Laura. Now we cannot part.’

There was a long silence after this, and then Sir Ralph moved nearer to her, and took one of her thin, cold hands in his.

‘You look ill,’ he said gently. ‘I am sure you have suffered very much?’

‘Yes, I have suffered very much,’ she answered. ‘I have felt that I have done a great wrong.’

‘You mean—’

‘In leaving my husband,’ continued Laura, more firmly. ‘I see now I had no right to think of my own feelings—that I should have thought of his—but to stay there was—’

‘Misery to you. I know it was.’

‘I was very unhappy. I felt I was wronging George; but now—’

‘Do you wish to return?’ asked Sir Ralph, briefly and bitterly.

‘I shall never return! But you must leave me, Sir Ralph.’

‘This is folly! Let us sit down and talk things over. When I got your letter I was terribly upset. I rode at once into Suffolk and—saw Mr Gifford.’

Laura’s breath came short; she fixed her eyes on Sir Ralph’s face.

‘I told him I did not know where you

were any more than he did. But I don't think he believed me.'

Laura sighed heavily,

'It is sad for him,' she said; 'but he will forget me. He must think me so ungrateful, and so I was. I should have remembered all he did.'

'You seem to think more of his feelings than mine.'

'It is not that; but I thought of my own. Now I see I should not have done so.'

'Well, all that is done and over at any-rate. Now, will you think a little of me?'

Laura did not speak. Her dark eyes were fixed wistfully on his face.

'When I read that—well, I do not know what to call it—confession of your father's, I was naturally upset. Your motive for refusing me long ago was only natural, too.

I don't mind telling you that, unless—I had cared for you as I do now—I should not have wished to marry a woman whose father killed mine. But I have thought it all over and over during the last three months. The blame was not yours; you acted most honourably in refusing me.'

'I had no choice,' said Laura, in a low tone.

'Many women would have acted differently. Had it not been for this wretched confession you would have married me then, would you not?'

'Yes,' half whispered Laura.

'You cared for me then?'

Laura made an almost mute assent with her pallid lips.

'Then let us throw this miserable acknowledgment of a hidden crime aside. Let it be to us as if it had never been

written. Laura, my love for you is so strong and great that I count nothing beside it. You have left Mr Gifford ; that page of your life is done and ended ; come abroad with me, and begin a new life.'

'I cannot! I cannot!' she answered, and again she put one of her slender, cold hands over her face, but Sir Ralph drew it away.

'My dear one,' he said in a tender tone, 'do not let any mistaken feeling of honour stand between us now. Your wrong, as you call it, to Mr Gifford is done, and never can be recalled. They say you are with me down there, Laura, so let them say it with truth. The world will receive you again when you are my wife.'

'I care nothing for the world,' answered Laura. 'The world smiles on you in

prosperity, and frowns on you in despair. But—but what I care for, what I must think of, is something higher and surer, Sir Ralph. It has been very sad for us,' and for a moment her slender hand slid into his, 'this terrible shadow on my life that my poor father left me. But for that there would have been no bar between us now—none, none—between your happiness and mine!'

Her voice broke and faltered as she uttered the last few words, and Sir Ralph felt her hot tears fall on their clasped hands.

'It has been hard, but let us forget it!' he said, eagerly and passionately. 'I shall never remember it, Laura; never, never upon my soul!'

'I believe you are generous enough to feel this,' answered Laura, again raising

her head ; ‘generous enough to put it away from your heart. But—but this is not all. There stands between us something more than this dark story. There stands the vows I made, and which I cannot break. Sir Ralph, leave me something ; leave me my self-respect. Leave me—oh ! I must speak it—my hope of a better and future life !’

‘I cannot go into such arguments. This life, with its mysteries and uncertainties is enough for me. I cannot believe in what I do not see.’

‘But do you not feel it ?’ asked Laura wistfully. ‘Does anything really satisfy you which is not right ? Suppose I went away with you now, would I—could I—be sure you would not change to me ? You could not respect me. I am putting this only on a

low and human standing; but there is another, and that, that—I must cling to!’

‘I swear I would not change to you!’

‘I believe you would always be good to me; but it could never be the same; never as if we had been married long ago! Speak of this no more, Sir Ralph. In my letter I asked you to feel to me as to one who is dead, and—and it must be so!’

‘And yet you love me?’

‘Yes; and I will love no other. I am not one to change.’

‘Nor I.’

‘You think so now,’ said Laura gently, ‘but you may not think so in a few years. A woman’s life is different to a man’s. I try to put self aside in thinking of you. Perhaps someone else—’

But here her voice broke and faltered. Ah, it was very hard to her heart to think, or speak, of 'someone else.' She wished, she meant, to do right, but human love was strong within her, and the dark face she loved was near her, and his strong hands held hers. For a moment or two a sort of irresistible weakness swept over her. Her head drooped on his shoulder; his lips were pressed on her hair. Sir Ralph thought that she had yielded, and in tender and passionate words he sought her love.

But after a brief pause, after one long, lingering sigh, Laura once more gathered up all the spiritual force of her nature, and shook the spell from her which had well nigh bewitched her soul. She raised her head, she rose, and stood before him.

‘Go now,’ she said. ‘I ask you to leave me now.’

Then Sir Ralph also rose and held out his hand.

‘But I may come again?’ he asked,

He felt half triumphant. His will had been stronger than hers, he thought; her love too deep for the fight she had held with it. He took both her hands, he fixed his dark eyes on her face.

‘You will never regret your love for me,’ he said.

‘No,’ answered Laura, half dreamily, ‘I shall never regret it.’

‘I will come to-morrow—in the afternoon; we can settle everything then.’

‘Yes,’ said Laura, with faltering lips; and so they parted. Sir Ralph went away excited, almost happy. There was

no doubt of his strong and deep attachment to the woman he had just left. As he crossed the bridge with its twinkling lights on either side, he was thinking only of her, and he meant to keep his word to her in the fullest sense, and marry her as soon as it was possible.

He was quite man of the world enough to know that, to a certain extent, by doing this he was wrecking his career. But this never entered his calculations.

‘She never shall regret it,’ he told himself ; and when he had reached the other end of the bridge a romantic desire seized on him again to recross it, and so once more look on the house where dwelt the woman he loved.

He did this. He looked at the dark river rolling silently on ; looked at the re-

flected lights on its gloomy breast. Then he looked at the sky, dark and gloomy also, and finally came to the little lighted house in the steep street, where his Laura, he knew, was thinking but of him !

He could not see through the closed curtains ; only a hazy light from the lamp within. He could not see a woman kneeling there in her agony ; a woman whose soul he had tortured until she could bear no more.

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He was up betimes the next morning, for he had much to do. He meant to take Laura immediately abroad, and remain there until they were married. He had thus his affairs to see after, his bills to pay. He had also the thousand pounds to pay to Mr Valentine Ross. He felt grateful to the little man, and considered whether

he should give him more than his due. But on second thoughts he reflected that Mr Valentine Ross had done very well. He therefore called early at the office, with his cheque-book in his pocket, after telegraphing to Laura that he would be with her at four o'clock in the afternoon.

Mr Ross was charmed to see him.

‘You have good news on your face,’ he said, with outstretched hand.

‘Yes,’ smiled Sir Ralph.

‘And you found her?’

‘Yes,’ again replied Sir Ralph, nodding his head.

‘And it is all right?’ inquired Mr Ross, with a smile.

‘It is all right,’ answered Sir Ralph, but a flush rose to his face, and he felt a faint inclination to knock Mr Ross down.

But he suppressed this. He sat down

and produced his cheque-book, and drew a cheque in the name of Mr Valentine Ross for a thousand pounds.

‘There is your cheque,’ he said, somewhat grimly, ‘with many thanks.’

‘Oh, my dear fellow—’ began Mr Ross, and then he hesitated, though he took the slip of paper in his hand.

‘Well?’ inquired Sir Ralph, wondering if there was anything wrong with the cheque.

‘Well, you see,’ continued Mr Ross, as though unwillingly, ‘there was the two hundred pounds you so kindly advanced. You ought to take that off.’

‘Never mind,’ answered Sir Ralph, with a somewhat hard laugh, ‘you can take that as part of your price.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ laughed Mr Ross delightedly. ‘What a funny fellow you are, Woodland! Part of my price, indeed;

we have all our price, though yours may be a pair of dark eyes. Ha, ha, ha !'

He was overjoyed. He loved nothing so well as money, and to have made twelve hundred pounds by giving a woman's address was a piece of good fortune he had never hoped for. He would have talked of Laura to Sir Ralph, but Sir Ralph gave him no encouragement. He had simply paid him, and that was all. After this Sir Ralph went to his bankers and took out letters of credit for a large sum. Then he wrote to his agent in Yorkshire, and to his steward at Harewood. He was going abroad for several months, he informed them, and, having settled all this, he returned to his hotel, intending to make some further arrangements before he drove over to Putney at four o'clock.

When the time came he started, carrying with him a ring, which he meant for Laura's slender hand. He felt a little nervous during the long drive, but this passed off as he approached Putney, and he sprang lightly from the cab when it drew up at the small linen-draper's shop, and inquired for Miss Boyd.

The melancholy-looking shopkeeper looked more melancholy still.

'You have not heard then, sir,' he said sadly.

'Heard what?' asked Sir Ralph quickly.

'Miss Boyd's gone, sir! She left this morning; and my wife's in a sad way about losing her, for she was a good lodger, and a nice lady, and times are bad.' And he sighed.

'Gone!' echoed Sir Ralph blankly.

At this moment, however, the landlady,

and the wife of the shopkeeper, who had been listening at the back-parlour door to the foregoing conversation, advanced into the shop, and addressed Sir Ralph.

‘Oh, sir, you’re the gentleman, aren’t you, who came to see Miss Boyd last night, and I fear you brought her ill news? She was up nearly all night after you were gone, for I heard her a-walking up and down the room, and groaning like anything. And this morning she said to me she must go.’

‘And she is gone?’ asked Sir Ralph, whose face had grown very pale.

‘Clean away, sir. She paid for a week’s notice, as agreed, and did everything that’s handsome, for she is quite the lady; but she looked just awful, sir. If you’re a friend of hers, I think you should see after her, for she had a look on her

face I did not like to see. I once saw a poor creature drawn out of the river, who had tried to take her life, and her eyes had the same fixed gaze as this poor lady's this morning. Excuse the liberty of me saying this, sir, but I feel that upset and put out, and I wish no harm may come to her.'

Sir Ralph did not speak. He grasped the back of a chair which was standing near, and leaned heavily on it, and his breath came hard.

'Excuse me, sir, for speaking of it, but I thought perhaps you might be a friend or relation, as the poor lady had no other visitors until you came last night,' went on the landlady, looking curiously at the grey pallor which had spread over Sir Ralph's face. Her husband also drew near and looked at the 'gentleman' curi-

ously. They both thought something had happened, that somehow or other Sir Ralph was connected with their lodger's departure.

‘Can I see her room?’ at last Sir Ralph said slowly and painfully.

‘To be sure, sir,’ answered the landlady. ‘It’s just as she left it, for I’ve been so upset I’ve not had time to clear up yet. She took all her books and papers away along with her, and when I asked if there was any hope of her coming back, she only shook her head. I fear it’s a bad business,’ and the landlady shook hers. ‘But come along, sir.’

Then Sir Ralph followed the landlady up the narrow staircase as he had done last evening, and she showed him into the empty room. It showed all the signs of a hasty departure. The grate was full of

half-burnt torn paper ; there were fragments here and there. He looked blankly round, and a strange desolation fell on his heart. Again she had fled from him, and once more all his hopes were dashed low.

‘And she left no address?’ he forced his pale lips to ask.

‘Not a word, sir. She just said “Good-bye, Mrs Hare,” that was all. But she forgot no one—not even Jane, the girl, though she’s a poor worker, and not much at anything. Still Miss Boyd put as much as half-a-crown into her hand, and then she went away, and I’m afraid somehow none of us will see her any more.’

Sir Ralph asked no further questions. He put a couple of sovereigns into Mrs Hare’s lean hand, and then he also went away. He felt completely cast down and

defeated ; he had been so sure, and this was the bitter end.

He drove back to his hotel, and found a letter from Laura awaiting him there, and he read it with a shamed heart and an intense feeling of disappointment and pain.

‘I entreat you for God’s sake,’ it began, ‘not to seek me out any more. I cannot bear the pain that I went through last night. I cannot bear the struggle with my own heart. I cannot, I will not go with you as you wish, and I ask you as a gentleman, as a man, to leave me alone. To see you utterly unnerves me, and would drive me mad if it went on. I scarcely know what I am writing as I write this, but I ask you again to see me no more.

L.’

That was all. In these brief, ill-written lines Sir Ralph felt Laura had sent her last words to him. After this he could not pursue her any more ; it would be cowardly to do so. He sat with her letter in his hand staring blankly before him. He had loved her truly, and a great desolation fell over his soul. It seemed to change everything to him. His interest in life was gone.

CHAPTER IX.

NEWS AT LAST.

SIR RALPH went abroad the next day after receiving Laura's letter. He went a moody and disappointed man, and at Suffold George Gifford heard that he had gone alone. Of Laura, George heard nothing.

'I sometimes think she is dead,' he one day said gloomily to Anna Lindsay.

Anna Lindsay only shook her head; she wished Laura was dead with all her heart, but she did not believe it. She believed Sir Ralph Woodland had gone

abroad to join her ; that he had waited three months before doing so for appearance' sake, but that he was with her now.

But when George Gifford again heard of Sir Ralph's movements he was still alone. He had been travelling from city to city, and then, finally, had started for India. And months and months passed away—six months, nine—and no news was heard at Suffold either of Sir Ralph or Laura Gifford. Then a rumour spread in the little town, a rumour started by the steward at Harewood. Sir Ralph was about to return ; the steward had heard from him, and he had written that the house had to be in readiness for him by a certain date.

George Gifford heard this news, and Anna Lindsay heard it, and they both pondered over it in their hearts. George

did not speak of it at Red House, but at last Anna Lindsay plucked up her courage and did.

‘Have you heard that Sir Ralph Woodland is coming back to Harewood, George?’ she said one evening to her cousin.

‘Yes, I have heard,’ he answered; and that was all, and Anna Lindsay dare say no more.

But George, though he was so reticent about it, had made up his mind how he would act. He had determined to seek an interview with Sir Ralph, and try and learn if he knew anything of Laura’s fate. And the very day after he heard of Sir Ralph’s arrival at Harewood he carried this resolution into effect.

He rode over in the morning to the Hall, and as he entered the avenue he

saw Sir Ralph leaning listlessly on one of the park gates smoking a cigarette. Sir Ralph heard the sound of his horse's hoofs, and looked up, and when he saw George a dusky red spread over his sallow face. But he raised his cap, and turned round at once to meet his visitor.

‘I wish to speak to you, Sir Ralph,’ said George gravely, also touching his hat.

‘Certainly,’ answered Sir Ralph. ‘Do you wish to speak to me here, or will you go into the house?’

‘What I have got to say would be best said indoors,’ replied George sternly. He was wondering how far this man had wronged him. That he had injured him he knew.

Sir Ralph whistled, and a groom almost immediately appeared.

‘Take Mr Gifford’s horse to the stables,’ said Sir Ralph.

‘No,’ interrupted George, ‘if he will hold him that will be enough. I will not detain you long.’

The two men walked in silence to the house after this, and Sir Ralph led the way to the library, followed by George. Sir Ralph closed the door behind them. Then he looked at George.

‘I have come to ask you a question, Sir Ralph,’ said George with some excitement. ‘Do you know anything of—my wife?’

‘I deeply regret to say I do not,’ answered Sir Ralph, steadily and very gravely.

‘Have you ever seen her since she left her home?’ asked George.

For a moment Sir Ralph hesitated. Then he replied, still slowly and steadily,—

‘Yes; I have seen her once. I forced my company on her some ten months ago. I bribed a man, in fact, to betray to me where she was.’

‘And where was she?’ asked George eagerly.

‘She was at Putney. I can give you the address. I saw her there one evening against her will, and the next afternoon, when I went to see her, I found she was gone. And she wrote to me the same day to request that I would never seek her out again; that if I were a gentleman I never would. And I never have.’

‘And this is the truth?’

‘On my word of honour, the exact truth.’

There was a short silence after this. George Gifford did not doubt Sir Ralph’s

words ; in fact, no one could doubt them. He looked brown, ill, and worn, but there was a steadfast look in his dark eyes as he spoke that was unmistakable.

‘And,’ asked George after a moment or two, ‘what was she doing? Did she tell you?’

‘It was through her pen that I traced her. She had taken a story to a man called Valentine Ross. But she did not speak of her affairs. When we parted I expected to see her again?’

Sir Ralph’s voice slightly faltered as he said these last words, and again that dusky colour rose to his face.

‘Then—you went to her with—a purpose?’ said George slowly.

‘I went to her with a purpose,’ answered Sir Ralph. ‘As I told you before, Mr Gifford, I do not seek to defend my-

self; to you, at least, I have no defence to offer. I went to try to induce her to go abroad with me until we could be married. But she refused to accept my offer. There is no blame due to her; none, none!’ continued Sir Ralph excitedly, and he began to pace the room with irregular footsteps. ‘If ever there was a woman who deserved respect and honour from all men it is—your wife. She asked me to leave her; to leave her for motives which I do not understand, and yet which I honour. She has been alone since she left you; alone toiling, I believe, for her daily bread, rather than accept all I could offer her.’

‘Then she will probably starve,’ retorted George Gifford bitterly. ‘I do not believe she can make enough to live on—and this is all your doing.’

‘I would do anything to undo what I have done. And I ought to tell you, when I saw her that evening, she spoke of you—spoke with regret and kindness—’

‘Much kindness she showed!’ interrupted George angrily.

‘At all events, she seemed to think more of your feelings than she thought of mine. But why continue this conversation? It can do no good; it is only painful, and I have told you everything I know.’

‘Will you give me the address where she was lodging at Putney, and then I will go?’

‘I will get it for you. She went there by the name of Miss Boyd, and she was lodging above a small linen-draper’s shop, just after you have crossed the bridge. They call the people Hare.’

George took down the address, and then almost without another word he left Harewood. He was now convinced that his wife had never been with Sir Ralph, but he knew also that she had left him for Sir Ralph's sake. He rode moodily back to Suffold. He asked himself what he should do? At all events, he was bound to see that she did not starve. He remembered the straits she had been in before he married her. He understood now why she had married him, and the thought was very bitter to him. She had married him because she believed Sir Ralph was changed to her, and she had nothing to live on!

George felt an angry man when he returned to Red House, and Anna Lindsay knew that he had heard something fresh, but she dare not ask him what it was.

But when, two days later, he announced his intention of going up to town without giving any reason, she felt very uneasy.

Could he have heard where Laura was, and was he going to her?' Anna asked herself jealously. But there was something in George's manner that forbade her to make any inquiries.

So George went away unquestioned, and at Putney he heard every word of Sir Ralph's story confirmed.

'Oh, yes,' said sad-faced Mrs Hare, 'I remember Miss Boyd perfectly, for she was quite the lady, poor dear;' and Mrs Hare shook her head.

'And did anyone come to see her?'. asked George, with darkling brow.

'Just once. A tall, dark-faced gentleman. He came one evening, and I misdoubt he brought poor Miss Boyd some

bad news. I heard her a-moaning and groaning most all the night after he was gone, and walking about as if she could get no rest. And in the morning she went away with such a look on her face I could not get it out of my head for days. Then in the afternoon the gentleman came back, and he was that awful put out when he heard she was gone I thought he was going to take a fit. But he didn't. He put as much as two pounds into my hand, and then he went away, for he was quite a gentleman, as anyone could see.'

'And you have heard nothing more—of the lady?'

'Not a word. My belief is there is nothing more to hear, and that she's lying in the river bed; but that's only my suspicion. And to be sure she took her

books and papers with her, and they could be no use to her there.'

'But what makes you think of such a thing?' asked George, in some agitation.

'Just her looks when she went away. She had a kind of it's-all-up look in her face as she crossed these doors if ever a woman had.'

This was all George could learn at Putney, and the police had no news for him. He, however, renewed his offer of a reward for any information concerning his lost wife, and he left her photograph with the superintendent with whom he was in communication.

Then he returned to Suffolk, but still he did not tell either his father or Anna Lindsay of his errand to town. He did not speak of Laura now, and they also did not speak of her to him. They fell

into their old ways; Anna Lindsay ordered the house, and studied George's tastes, and played whist with her uncle and cousin in the quiet evenings. It was the same as before his marriage, and yet with a difference. Laura's memory rankled in George's heart, and he could not forgive the wife who had forsaken him.

But, suddenly, in the winter time, news came of Laura at last. A telegram first, and then a letter from the superintendent of police in London, with whom George had entrusted the case, recalled him to town. In the letter the superintendent regretted to inform Mr Gifford that the body of a poor lady had been rescued from the river, whose appearance bore so strong a resemblance to the portrait in his possession that he himself had no doubt as to its identity. But he re-

quested Mr Gifford at once to proceed to London also for the purpose of identification.

This letter was a great shock to George. He remembered at once what the shop-keeper's wife had said at Putney of the despairing look on Laura's face when she had left her house; he remembered a hundred things which, in his anger against her, he had well nigh forgotten!

He went up to town at once, and was met by the superintendent, who led him, half dazed, to the place where the still figure lay whom he was to pronounce had been his wife or not.

'The face is a good deal disfigured,' said the superintendent pitifully, gently raising the white cloth that covered it; 'but still I think there is no doubt.'

For a moment or two George could not

look. The place seemed to swim around him. The cold stillness struck a deadly chill on his heart.

‘This is the portrait,’ said the superintendent, still gently.

Then George glanced at the picture in the man’s hand ; glanced at the handsome, smiling woman—at Laura, taken on her bridal tour in Paris ; at Laura, dressed in the gown and jewels he had given her—and then—

He looked at the dead face before him. It was white, save where a hideous mark across the upper part of it had disfigured the fair lineaments. The dark hair fell thickly around the shapely head. The little hand with the wedding ring on the third finger was clenched. The eyes were closed, but the fringed lids George thought he remembered only too well.

‘I think there’s no mistake, sir?’ said the superintendent, and he held the portrait of the bride down so as to touch the dead face. ‘She must have struck against something as she fell; it’s broken the nose-bone, d’ye see!’

No word came from George’s pale lips. He stood staring as if spell-bound at the ghastly figure lying before him.

‘There is no mistake,’ something seemed to whisper in his ear, ‘no mistake;’ and then he staggered back and almost fell into the superintendent’s stalwart arms.

‘Do you identify the poor lady, sir?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ half whispered George.

And then the man led him away, and George shuddered as he went.

.

The next day they laid her in her un-

timely grave, and George followed her to the quiet cemetery they had chosen for her last resting place. She was buried there as the wife of George Gifford, of Suffolk, but nothing was told of her tragic ending, or her brief, sad life. It was a case of suicide, it was supposed, but there was no fact absolutely to prove this. It was a mystery, and, in spite of all investigations, such it remained.

But on the day after her funeral George wrote two letters, one addressed to his father, and the other to Sir Ralph Woodland, at Harewood. To his father he simply told the sad news that poor Laura was dead; that he had seen her after death, and that she was buried. He felt that it would do no good now to fill the gossips' lips with any dreary particulars. Only to

Sir Ralph Woodland he told the bitter truth.

‘SIR,’ he wrote,—‘Yesterday I followed my poor wife to her grave. Her body had been found in the river two days previously, and I was called to London to identify her. There was no doubt ; and I think your own conscience must now reproach you for your unjustifiable conduct towards her. GEORGE GIFFORD.’

This letter was forwarded to Sir Ralph from Harewood to his club in town, and absolutely overwhelmed him with horror and bitter, unavailing remorse. For days he was as a man distraught, and then he decided to leave England, carrying away with him the ever-present memory of the woman he loved.

But before he went he paid a last visit to Laura's grave. He took with him a cross of white flowers, and laid it on the new-turned sod. Long he stood there, a gloomy-faced man, dressed in deep mourning; and some passers-by looked at him with pity, and whispered to each other that his heart's best hopes must be buried there. Then, when he was quite alone, when the last echo of footsteps had died away, he knelt down and kissed the turf above her head.

'Good-bye, my darling,' he whispered. 'You would have been happier with me, Laura; though I wrecked your life, you would have been happy with me.'

.

George Gifford went back to Suffolk,

and his father and cousin received him with silent sympathetic hand-clasps; and by his wish all the household at Red House were clothed in deep mourning. It was known in the little town that Mrs George Gifford was dead, but the widower gave no particulars.

‘I saw her,’ he told Anna Lindsay, but the subject was evidently so painful to him that they forebore to ask him any questions.

Then, little by little, new interests arose; new anxieties. Old Mr Gifford took seriously ill in the winter time, and Anna Lindsay nursed him with unceasing devotion. This threw her, of course, constantly with George, who, naturally, felt grateful to her for her kindness to his father. She did not, however, press her attentions on George, but she studied him

in every way, and gradually he seemed to recover his usual spirits.

But Mr Gifford did not recover his health. He threw off the sharp attack of illness, but it was plain to all eyes, and to the old man himself, that he was fast going to his long rest. He grew weak and listless; he sat dreaming vaguely of bygone times, and seemed to take little interest in things around him.

Yet one evening, when the days were lengthening for the spring, he spoke to George of Anna Lindsay.

‘I have provided for her, George,’ he said; ‘but after I am gone, what will you do?’

‘Please do not speak of such things, father,’ answered George, moving uneasily.

‘My boy, my time for here is not long,

continued the old man, 'and I should be pleased to think that Anna would remain with you. She would make you a good wife, George, and she loves you well, for the news of your first marriage nearly killed her.'

'What!' said George, startled.

'I never told you,' went on Mr Gifford, 'for it could have done no good; but when I read your letter, in which you told us, I shall never forget Anna's face; it frightened me.'

There was nothing more said. Mr Gifford was not a man of many words, but George knew that his father would not have spoken thus without reason. It softened his feelings towards Anna. Here was one woman, at least, who had loved him for himself; and then he sighed, and thought of the dead woman who had not

loved him, lying in her grave. But he made no difference in his manner to his cousin; and it was not until after Mr Gifford's death that any change took place in the quiet household.

But, as the spring advanced, the good old man slept peacefully away, dying with the respect and love of all around him. Both George and Anna Lindsay were sincerely and deeply affected by their loss. But about a week after the funeral Anna had a word to say to her cousin which had a great influence on their future lives.

‘George,’ she said one evening after dinner, when the twilight was gathering around them, ‘I must be thinking of leaving Red House now.’

‘I do not see any occasion for that, Anna,’ said George, somewhat nervously, for he remembered his father's words.

‘Yes, George,’ said Anna, in an agitated voice, ‘I must go, for people would talk about you and me—unless—’

‘Unless we were married, I suppose. Well, Anna, do you wish this? If so, let it be as you will.’

CHAPTER X.

AFTER DEATH.

THREE years after old Mr Gifford's death ; three long years to the weary of the earth, and short to the happy ones ; a great storm broke over our northern seaboard, carrying death and destruction on its wild tumultuous breath.

It swept with terrific force over a sea-girt village, perched on a high cliff, and inhabited chiefly by fisher-people. This village is named Reddrift, and about mid-day, when the sky was one dull, uniform grey, and the wind blowing a hurricane,

and the rain falling in great, blinding, splashing drops, a cry arose from the little group of fishermen and seamen collected on the shore below the cliff, that a ship was to be seen struggling amid the boiling mass of waters out at sea.

‘They’ve lost all power over her,’ said an old weather-beaten pilot, scanning her through his glass.

‘She’s drifting fast on the rocks,’ said a young fisherman, ‘let’s man the lifeboat, she may strike not far fra here.’

This was quickly done ; and every eye was strained watching the struggles of the vessel amid the mountainous waves. Sometimes she seemed to disappear ; then again she rose. She seemed a trim little ship, and the seamen present pronounced her to be a yacht. Amongst those watch-

ing her on the shore was a tall, slender woman, dressed in blue serge, and wearing a sailor hat. By her side was another woman, a girl who, apparently, was her servant.

‘Go, Elizabeth,’ said the tall lady to the girl, and producing a bunch of keys as she spoke, ‘and bring down the brandy out of the cupboard in the parlour, and two blankets. If the ship strikes we should have something ready for the poor men.’

‘Yes, Madame,’ replied the girl, and she turned and ran with quick light steps up the steep path that led from the shore to the village.

Ten minutes later the doomed ship, swaying, tumbling, helpless, drifted with a grinding, crushing blow against one of the huge, brown, half-submerged rocks that

stand out into the sea only a few yards distant to Reddrift. The lifeboat was ready; there was a momentary lull; gallant hands pushed her off, and six gallant young fishermen instantly manned her.

They rowed slowly out. The foam swept over them, the waves seemed to engulf them, but still they went on. They reached the ship; the bystanders saw some of the sailors leap from the ship into the boat. They saw, too, one man lowered by a rope by those on board, and received in the arms of the men in the boat; he was evidently injured. Then they saw the lifeboat push off again from the sinking ship. There were still some sailors on board of her, but the lifeboat now quickly sped her way to the shore, and men standing

there ran out into the surf and drew her in.

The rescued sailors sprang out of the boat, but still they carried the injured man in their arms, and he was quickly laid on the shore. Then the tall woman, whom they called Madame, bade them lift him on the blankets she had sent for; she knelt down beside him and moistened his lips with the brandy her servant had brought her. His face was haggard and marked, his hair grey at the temples, but as Madame bent over him, a little cry escaped her lips.

One of the sailors of the wrecked ship, who was also bending over him, now looked up.

‘How was he hurt?’ asked Madame quickly.

‘A spar struck him, my lady,’ answered this man, ‘about an hour ago, and he’s never spoken since. He’s the owner of the yacht. He’s Sir Ralph Woodland.’

‘I know,’ answered Madame, with her dark eyes fixed on the haggard face lying before her. ‘He’s an old friend of mine. He must be carried at once to my house in the village.’

This was quickly done. A mattress was procured, and on this Sir Ralph Woodland was carried to Madame’s picturesque, old - fashioned house in the village. It stood back in a garden. It showed all the signs of care and attention in its surroundings and details.

‘Take him to my room,’ said Madame, who was walking by the side of the

mattress. 'Elizabeth, run on and stir the fire, and show the men the way. And, Davidson,' and she turned to an old fisherman who was also walking in the procession, 'run as fast as you can for Dr Newbridge. Tell him to come at once; that a gentleman, the owner of the wrecked yacht, is seriously injured.'

'Yes, Madame,' answered the old fisherman, touching his cap respectfully. They evidently all knew her. She was, indeed, considered the great lady of the village, and in times of poverty, sickness or sorrow was never appealed to in vain.

In a few minutes more Sir Ralph Woodland was carried into a comfortable bedroom and laid on the bed. Here, as outside, everything was arranged with

good taste. Again Madame bent over the prostrate man, and this time he swallowed a little of the brandy she held to his lips. Then his drenched clothes were removed, and replaced by a warm flannel dressing-gown, and his wet boots pulled off, and his cold feet chafed with spirit. Madame, assisted by one of the sailors of the yacht, did everything she could to revive him, and a quarter of an hour later the village doctor hurried in.

‘Ah, Madame,’ he said, also respectfully, ‘I hope there is nothing serious the matter?’

He was a long, lean, weather-beaten man, this village doctor, but he apparently had his wits about him, and after examining the patient he beckoned Madame out of the room.

‘It’s slight concussion of the brain,’ he

said ; ‘ the sailor says a spar struck him on the head, but he’ll pull through all right. He’ll wander a bit most likely, and must be watched.’

‘ I will watch him,’ answered Madame calmly, though her handsome face was very pale. ‘ I thank God that it is no worse.’

A serene expression of trust and hope shone in her dark eyes as she spoke. She looked a woman of lofty aims, and a pure and stainless life, and the village doctor regarded her with admiration.

‘ It is very good of you,’ he said. ‘ But you are always good.’

‘ He is an old friend of mine,’ replied Madame, ‘ and I am naturally pleased to help him. The other poor men, doctor, can have what they want in the kitchen,

Elizabeth can see after them, and I will pay for their accommodation in the village until we see what Sir Ralph's wishes are regarding them.'

'Sir Ralph?' said the doctor, inquiringly.

'Yes, Sir Ralph Woodland; I knew him several years ago.'

The doctor, after doing what he could for Sir Ralph, and giving Madame directions, hurried away to see what assistance the rest of the men required; and Madame was left alone with her unexpected guest. She stood looking at him and her eyes grew soft and moist as she did so.

'It is strange, strange,' she murmured, and she bent down and took one of his brown, lean hands in hers.

Her touch seemed to affect his dulled

senses. He stirred, and a moment or two later opened his eyes, and fixed them with a bewildered look on her face.

‘Do you feel better?’ she asked softly.
‘This is a strange meeting.’

‘After death,’ murmured Sir Ralph, still looking up at Madame’s face; ‘this is after death.’

She did not contradict him. She thought he was wandering, as the doctor had said that it was not unlikely that he should do so.

She therefore sat quietly down by the bed, and Sir Ralph’s sunken eyes followed her as she did this.

‘You are not much changed,’ he said presently, in a dreamy, far-away voice, ‘only you look happier.’

‘I am happier,’ answered Madame

gently. 'I have lived through the storm and found rest at last, Sir Ralph.'

'In death?' asked the half-unconscious man.

'No, in life,' answered Madame soothingly.

'But you died? I always wished to meet you after death—and we have met at last—met at last!

He put his hand out as if he wished to take Madame's, and she took it in her own.

'It is warm,' murmured Sir Ralph. 'How strange that it should be warm!'

'It is warm with life,' smiled Madame, a little wistfully.

'But you are dead? I went to your grave—it broke my heart.'

There was something inexpressibly

mournful in Sir Ralph's tone as he said this, and Madame's eyes filled with sudden tears.

'It broke my heart,' he kept murmuring, and then he seemed to relapse into partial unconsciousness, though his lips moved occasionally.

Presently he seemed to sleep, but about four o'clock, when the doctor returned, he woke up, and looked at him as if in astonishment.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'I am the doctor, Dr Newbridge; and I have good news for you, Sir Ralph Woodland. All the men on board your yacht have been rescued by the lifeboat, and the poor fellows are all right, and being well cared for here by Madame,' and the doctor turned and looked at the mistress of the house as he spoke.

Sir Ralph's eyes followed his, and fixed themselves on the handsome features which seemed so strangely familiar to him.

‘Madame?’ he repeated.

‘Yes, Sir Ralph,’ said Madame, and a soft blush spread over her face as she spoke; ‘you knew me long ago under another name—Laura Ingram—’

Sir Ralph started up in bed as he heard the name, and stared at Laura with wide-open eyes.

‘It is long since,’ she said falteringly.

‘Laura!’ gasped Sir Ralph. ‘Not—not living!’

‘Yes,’ answered Laura a little sadly, ‘living still. I said I must be as one dead to you when we parted, and I have been—but—’

‘Humph!’ said the doctor between his teeth, and turned away and quietly left

the room. He was too shrewd a man not to see that his presence was no longer wanted.

‘But,’ said Sir Ralph, after he was gone, with a strange, yearning, puzzled look on his haggard face, and stretching out his hands towards her, ‘Mr Gifford wrote to me that you were dead. I went to your grave—’

‘George was deceived then by some mistake,’ answered Laura, ‘for I do not think intentionally he would mislead you. I have lived all this time as Madame Vauvert.’

‘Madame Vauvert, the writer?’ asked Sir Ralph in extreme surprise.

‘Yes,’ said Laura, with a faint smile. ‘When I first left my husband I went to Mr Brook, the publisher, and threw myself on his mercy. I asked him to keep

my true name and address a secret from everyone, and he has most honourably fulfilled his trust. As Madame Vauvert I have done very well, and for the last two years have lived on the coast here.'

'Strange! This is, indeed, most strange!' exclaimed Ralph, still with his eyes fixed on Laura's face, as if he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. 'I have read some of Madame Vauvert's books, and I—used to think of you as I did so—though when did I not think of you!'

'That is all past and ended now,' answered Laura gently.

He did not speak for a moment; then he put out one of his hands and grasped hers with nervous force.

'My life has been one long remorse,' he said.

Laura was affected ; her hand trembled in his. A strange, almost forgotten, emotion stirred in her breast.

‘And—you know nothing of—Suffold?’ presently asked Sir Ralph, in an agitated voice.

‘Nothing. I have been dead to poor George, as I have been to you.’

‘And you do not know—that—after your supposed death, that he married?’

‘Married!’ exclaimed Laura, looking up in great surprise. The news astonished her. It was a sort of shock, and for a moment she could scarcely realise it.

‘Yes,’ continued Sir Ralph, ‘nearly three years ago, after old Mr Gifford’s death, he married his cousin, Miss Lindsay.’

‘Married Anna Lindsay! Impossible!’ cried Laura.

‘Yet it is a fact. And—I have other news for you—’

Laura did not speak; she looked in his face. She had not courage to ask him what it was.

‘You—you are a widow,’ faltered Sir Ralph, still grasping her trembling hand. ‘In the spring of last year—’91—Mr Gifford took influenza, and it ran on to inflammation, and he died after a very short illness.’

Laura gave a gasping sigh, and grew suddenly pale. George dead. George! She stood there, and all her past life seemed to come back to her. The dreary days at Red House; the subtle love that had stolen back into her heart; her misery, and her flight. And George—poor George!

She remembered, too, his kindness, his unselfish love.

‘Oh, it was cruel, cruel of me to leave him!’ she suddenly cried, and then turned and left the room, with tears streaming down her pale face.

But after awhile, after the first shock and pain was over, a sort of relief came to her heart. Poor George was gone, she told herself, and he could not have loved her very deeply since he had married Anna Lindsay so soon. Here she wronged George, but it made her self-reproach lighter, and as these thoughts were passing through her mind the doctor rapped at the door of the room she was in.

‘May I come in?’ he asked, and when he entered he looked very grave. ‘I’ve no right to interfere I know,’ he said, casting down his eyes, ‘but Sir Ralph Woodland is my patient, and any sort of excitement is bad for him at present. They told

me just now that you had left his room, and when I went up to him I found him very much upset. He ought—in fact, he must—be kept very quiet, or, with the injury to his head we'll be having a case of brain fever.'

'I—am so sorry,' faltered Laura, 'but—he told me some sad news.'

'So he told me. But please, Madame, go to him now, and try to keep him calm.'

And after a few moments Laura went. She sat down by the bedside and spoke soothing words to the injured man, and her voice seemed to have the old sweet charm for him.

'If you are sure it is not all a dream?' he said wistfully.

'I am sure it is not a dream,' answered Laura gently. 'I am sure you are here

in my house at Reddrift, and that all your poor men are saved, and that I am going to nurse you and take care of you until you are quite well.'

'And then?' asked Sir Ralph, with a restless sigh.

'You must get well first. And now take this and try to sleep.'

.

Many days passed before Sir Ralph was 'quite well.' Anxious days to his old friend and constant nurse, who used to sit by him, noting sadly how changed he was, how his sorrow and remorse for her had eaten into his heart, making him old before his time. But at last—one evening in the gloaming—Sir Ralph spoke of the past.

'There is surely nothing to part us

now, Laura?’ he asked nervously, looking up in her half-averted face.

‘There is still—my poor father’s crime,’ answered Laura, with quivering lips.

‘That is nothing to me ; my love for you is everything.’

Then Laura bent down, and took one of his thin hands, and laid it softly against her cheek.

‘If that is so—’ she half whispered.

After this everything was soon settled. Poor George Gifford had been dead more than a year, and they had no one to consult. They were married at Reddrift, but when the simple announcement of their marriage appeared in the newspapers two women were almost utterly overcome with rage and consternation.

‘At the Parish Church, Reddrift, by the Vicar, the Rev. John Mason, Sir

Ralph Woodland, Bart., of Rathborne Hall, Yorks, to Laura, widow of George Gifford, late of Suffolk.'

At Red House, Suffolk, the supposed widow of George Gifford read these words, and nearly fell off her chair in excitement and dismay. She could scarcely believe the evidence of her own eyesight.

'Not dead! that creature not dead!' she cried, panting with passion. Then she began, pale with rage, to realise what this meant to her. She was not the widow of George Gifford; Red House was not hers; nothing was hers except what her uncle had left her. But she was never disturbed in her possessions. Neither Sir Ralph nor Lady Woodland ever made any claims on the property or money which was justly Laura's.

Only unamiable people sometimes addressed their letters to 'Miss Anna Lindsay,' and this was gall and wormwood to Anna's soul.

And the other woman, Patty May—Patty May no longer, but Mrs Snowe, the Vicar of Laytonside's wife—read the announcement of Laura's marriage to Sir Ralph, also with the utmost astonishment and fury. After her interview with Sir Ralph at Harewood, when he lay injured, Patty had returned to their rooms in town in a state of mind almost impossible to describe. Ella May had advised her sister not to go to Harewood, but Patty had insisted on running the risk, and having much confidence in her youth, beauty and attractions, had hoped by one bold throw to win back Sir Ralph.

When she failed, for some days she was like a madwoman. Then she dried her tears.

‘I will marry Mr Snowe,’ she said to Ella, and she did marry him; but all the same she had never forgiven Sir Ralph Woodland nor the woman whom she believed had taken him away from her.

His marriage, therefore, was a fresh blow to her, and she wondered how she could best take her revenge. She spoke slightly of the new Lady Woodland in the parish, yet when, some months later, Sir Ralph brought his wife to Rathbourne Hall, she proposed to her husband that they should call on them.

‘Yes, of course, my dear,’ answered the kindly Vicar.

And they did call, but were not re-

ceived, and the next day Patty received a letter which caused her cheeks to tingle. It was as follows:—

‘Sir Ralph Woodland requests that Mrs Snowe will not attempt in future to visit his wife, whom she so basely slandered.’

Patty was furious, and more furious still when she heard that Lady Danvers was staying at Rathbourne Hall, and that all the best people in the neighbourhood had called on Lady Woodland. She, therefore, wisely ceased to abuse her, but has not yet succeeded in overcoming Sir Ralph’s prejudices.

And the husband and the wife?

‘I think sometimes we do not deserve to be so happy,’ Laura once said to him softly.

‘We paid a heavy price for it at all events,’ answered Sir Ralph, and he stooped down and kissed his wife’s dear face.

THE END.

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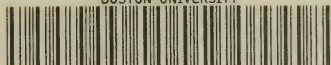
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